

Skipper and the Headland Four

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Skipper's first adventure with the Applebys
SKIPPER THE DOG FROM THE SEA

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CHAPTER ONE

A FRIEND FOR SKIPPER

'HEADLAND F-A-A-ARM!' Kitty Appleby sang happily above the cackle of the herring gulls. 'Here I come. Right back where I started from!'

She hurried along the path that zig-zagged up the headland from the sandy cove. It was lovely to be back! She had been away only a week, spending part of the Easter holidays with Great-Aunt Margaret who lived in a smoky London suburb. Of course it had been a change, but it hadn't been like home.

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She had been in such a hurry to get back that she had caught the earlier train that day, left her suitcase at Minton railway-station for her father to pick up on his way home from market, and taken the short cut home along the beach.

Half-way up the steep path, she paused and looked seawards. A cormorant was almost touching the waves with the down-beat of his wings. Farther out to sea a flying gannet dived steeply after a fish. Seals basked on the flat rocks at the west side of Bird Island, a rocky and grass-topped paradise not far from the mainland.

'Nowhere in the whole world can there be anywhere as wonderful as this,' Kitty thought, and, though she was still out of breath, she quickened her step so that she would reach home all the sooner.

She scrambled up the last few yards of the cliff path. Now she was walking on the short, springy turf of the headland towards Four Acre field, and she was almost home. Headland Farm! She could see the pink-washed walls of the farmhouse. The pear-tree in the garden was a cloud of white blossom, and patches of golden daffodils were blooming amid the grass under the apple-trees in the orchard.

Frank, the cowman, helped by Laddie, the

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black-and-white collie, was just bringing in the Jerseys for milking. Roddy was steering the gaily painted tractor into the shed. Kitty's eyes twinkled – and Mummy would be in the kitchen, baking a special cake for her homecoming.

Kitty broke into a run. In a moment she would see the Home Field. Yes, there was Dapple, her grey Welsh pony mare, standing under the shade of the big oak-tree. She was lazily swishing her silky tail as she dozed.

Kitty watched her, feeling thrilled and proud. Soon – within a few days perhaps – Dapple would have her first foal.

'If he's a chestnut, like his father, I'll call him Rusty,' Kitty decided, 'and if he's a grey – let me see. . . . Smoky!'

She turned suddenly as she heard a welcoming bark, and a shout from the youngest Appleby – her brother Pete.

'Kitty!' Pete called urgently. 'Hi, *Kit!*'

She heard a scamper of paws and feet. First a white Alsatian bounded into sight from the high hedge that sheltered Barn Field from the south-west gales. He streaked towards her, his head stretched forward and his ears flattened as though streamlined for speed. His snowy, bushy tail flowed like a banner behind him.

Next came Pete, nimble and fleet in his plim-

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solls, with his ginger hair glowing in the afternoon sun. Jog-trotting behind, rather more sedately – because after all they were older than Pete and Kitty – came Roddy and Jane.

‘Skipper!’ Kitty hugged the Alsatian who was first to reach her. Then, dodging his joyful face-licks, she turned to the others. ‘It’s lovely to see you all. And – oh, goodness, steady on, Skipper – not so rough! Anyone would think I’d been away for years instead of for less than a week.’

‘Hullo, Kit!’ grinned Pete. ‘You’re early.’

‘Yes, I caught the first train.’

‘I expect you were in a hurry to get away from Great-Aunt Margaret,’ said Jane. ‘What kind of a time did you have?’

‘Oh, it wasn’t too bad,’ said Kitty. ‘Of course, Benford’s awfully dull. Just streets and not even a park, and three changes of buses to get to the Zoo.’

‘How was Great-Aunt Margaret?’ Roddy asked.

‘Full of charm to begin with, but it soon wore off,’ Kitty reported.

‘And then she’d be thoroughly crotchety,’ said Roddy. ‘I know. I had some last year.’

‘Yet she’s so fond of us – or so Mummy says,’ sighed Kitty. ‘Anyway, I’ve done the Appleby duty-visit for this Easter. It’ll be your turn next year, Jane. Goodness knows why she doesn’t come



to stay with us instead. You'd think the sea-air would do her good.'

'This time next year – if not before,' Jane said, and her voice was unusually serious, 'we might *all* be living at Aunt Margaret's – sharing the house with her.'

'No!' Kitty protested. 'What a horrible idea!'

'It's a grim thought,' Roddy said, and shifted his feet uneasily. 'We've got some news for you, Kit – news that ought to be broken gently.'

'Yes, it was a dreadful blow to us when we first heard,' added Jane, 'so brace yourself.'

'Terrible!' Pete said feelingly, and even his freckled face was disturbingly downcast.

'Will someone please explain?' Kitty said desperately. 'I gather it's bad news, but what?'

'Well, a couple of days ago, Jane happened to

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overhear Mum and Dad talking,' began Roddy.

'Yes, Daddy said: "Another season like the last one, and we'll have to sell up – lock, stock and barrel –" ' added Jane. 'Then, Mummy said: "Well, at least we'll have *some* sort of a roof over our heads. A letter has just come from Aunt Margaret, saying that she'll be only too glad to let us live with her, and then the children can go to school in Benford; and you" – she meant Daddy – "will be able to get a job in London".'

'Oh, gosh!' gasped Kitty. 'So that's why Great-Aunt Margaret said, just as I was getting on the train: "Young lady, you may be seeing me again a lot sooner than you imagine!" '

'Of course, it's jolly decent of Aunt Margaret to offer to have us all,' said Jane, as they trudged forlornly towards the farmhouse. 'But imagine – life in Benford – nothing but streets, and shops and clanking trams! And Daddy will *hate* it. Aunt Margaret's his aunt as well as ours, and she still bosses him as though he were a small boy. And imagine poor Mummy having to share a kitchen with her.'

'But why might Daddy have to sell the farm?' Kitty asked.

'He's got to pay back the money he owes to the bank and to other people,' Roddy explained. 'He's

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either got to stump up by the end of the year – or sell up.'

'By auction, probably,' Jane nodded. 'And you know what that means – a public sale. The auctioneer sits at a table in the yard after every thing and every animal in and on the farm, has been listed and numbered. The auctioneer announces whatever he's about to sell, says a few words about it, and then asks for bids. When the bidding stops, he calls out "Going – going – GONE!" and he bangs a wooden hammer on the table – and that's that!'

'Think if it, Kit.' Pete's lower lip was quivering. 'All our ponies would have to be sold – Darkie, Prince and Dapple.'

'When Smith's farm failed at Westerham, we all went with Daddy to buy the binder, remember,' Roddy prompted, kicking at a stone, 'and the auctioneer even sold the sheepdogs. They fetched less than ten shillings each.'

'Laddie would have to go,' Kitty said softly. Her hand stretched down and touched the thick white ruff of the Alsatian who padded at her side. 'But what about Skipper?'

'I think we'd be able to take him to Aunt Margaret's,' said Roddy. 'He'd be able to have a kennel in the backyard, and he gets on well with our farm cats, so I expect he'd live in peace with Aunt Margaret's precious Persian.'

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'All the cows would have to be sold, of course,' sighed Jane; 'and the pigs, and sheep, and poultry.'

'Daddy's pedigree herd of Jerseys!' Kitty suddenly exclaimed. 'Oh, it would break his heart to sell those! Isn't there anything we can do so that he doesn't have to sell up?'

'Yes, I was coming to that,' said Roddy. 'Of course, it's back to school for us on Monday; and a long time before we break up for the summer holidays, but we'll be able to help after we've done our homework, and at week-ends and early in the morning.'

'We've all got to pull together,' said Jane, 'both in tackling more jobs about the house and farm and in making more money for Daddy – and, oh here he is!'

They reached the farmyard just as Mr Appleby drove the Land-Rover through the gates. At the sound of the vehicle, Mrs Appleby appeared in the kitchen doorway. Kitty was about to run forward to greet them when Roddy grabbed her arm.

'Oh, Kit, I ought to have told you before. We're all pretending we don't know,' he whispered. 'Mother and Dad would be upset if they thought we were worried. We've got to help more, but not let them know why we're helping. Understand?'

Kitty nodded and ran to her father as he took her suitcase from the Land-Rover.

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'I asked the ticket-collector to give you my suitcase, and to tell you I was walking on, Daddy,' she told him. 'But maybe I ought to have waited, so that I could have ridden back with you.'

'That's all right, chick.'

He smiled, and hugged and kissed her. He was worried, but he was trying not to show it. She gave him an extra kiss before running to her mother.

Kitty buried her head against her mother, cuddling near to her. Then she could no longer control the choky feeling in her throat. Her shoulders shook.

'Just in time for tea, Kitty dear,' Mummy was



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saying. 'And, well, bless me!' She gently lifted Kitty's chin and smiled into her tearful eyes. 'I do believe you're actually sorry to come home!'

Kitty thought: 'Oh, Mummy! If only you knew.'

But she didn't say anything. If Mummy and Daddy could smile through their troubles, so could she.

'There!' Mummy said, as she saw Kitty's tremulous smile. 'Now the sun's shining again – and there's chocolate cake for tea!'

After helping her mother and Jane with the washing up, Kitty said: 'Bags I shut the hens in for the night and collect the eggs!'

Meanwhile Skipper was in the yard – looking out of the wreck of an overturned boat which he used as a kennel during the daytime whenever the sun was hot, or the weather rainy. At night he slept in the kitchen.

As soon as Kitty appeared with the egg basket, Skipper got from under his boat-kennel, took the basket handle between his teeth, and led the way to the poultry house. This was a job he liked.

Kitty shut the Rhode Islands into their hen-house and began to round up the Light Sussex. They were young pullets and were more wayward than the Rhodies.

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'Hey, Skipper!' Kitty called to the Alsatian. 'Into the pen with them.'

Skipper gently and patiently drove the hens until, at last, he had coaxed even Arabella, the most wayward hen of all, into the poultry house.

Kitty collected the eggs while Skipper held the basket steadily. After she had felt in all the nest boxes, she walked to the far hedgerow to have another look at Dapple.

She stopped to gaze in wonderment. Stumbling, in an effort to stand, was a newly born, long-legged, chestnut foal, flicking his tail in pleasure as he nuzzled against Dapple to feed.

It was quite a while before Kitty could even take another breath. But when she did, she murmured two words to herself:

'Hello, Rusty!'

She looked long at the foal. The setting sun seemed to spotlight him. His woolly coat was fawn. Yes, he would be a handsome chestnut pony. On his forehead was a patch of white – star-shaped. He was a lovely foal; quite perfect.

She thought how all the farm animals might have to be sold – Dapple, and Rusty, too. Mother and son. Going – going – GONE. . . . She shivered, and Skipper put his cold nose against her hand.

'Bring us luck, Rusty,' a small voice seemed to be saying deep inside her. 'We need it – *terribly!*'

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As she spoke, the foal turned to look at her. His eyes were gentle and kindly. He gazed round as though he was thinking how wonderful was the world in which he suddenly found himself. Now he was standing sideways, and she could see the tender, rounded outline of him. He was a lovelier foal than she had ever imagined.

Skipper stood at Kitty's side, staring at the newcomer, wagging his tail with delight, before running back to the farm, barking to break the good news to the others.

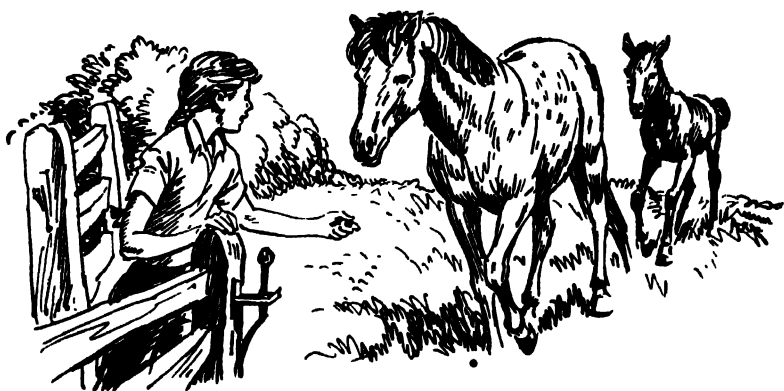
Kitty ran after Skipper, calling excitedly: 'Come here, everybody! It's happened. Hey, Roddy! Jane! Mummy! Dapple's foal's been born.'

For a while the problem of the Applebys' future – whether the farm would have to be sold or not – was forgotten as they hurried from different parts of the farm to admire Rusty.

'I'm going back for my camera,' Jane decided. 'I'll use a whole roll of film on him.'

'Well done, Dapple!' said Mrs Appleby, patting the mare. 'I know you'll be a good mother to your son.'

'Gosh, oh, gosh!' exclaimed Pete. 'What an absolutely *super* foal!'



CHAPTER TWO

SKIPPER THE SALESDOG

WHEN Kitty was arranging daffodils in a copper jug on the kitchen dresser after supper, an idea struck her.

‘I say, Jane,’ she suggested. ‘Why don’t we pick some of the daffodils from the orchard and sell them in Minton?’

So, after breakfast next morning, Kitty ran to the five-barred gate that led to the Home Meadow.

Dapple whinnied her usual greeting and, followed by her foal, came to the gate. Kitty gave Dapple a lump of sugar and patted Rusty. The foal’s coat felt soft and woolly and warm under Kitty’s hands. He lovingly bunted her shoulder

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with his head while Kitty stroked his velvety neck.

'Dear Rusty,' she said gently. 'You really are the sweetest foal! But I can't spend much time with you this morning. There's such a lot to do.'

She hurried to the poultry houses, let out the hens and ducks and filled a basket with warm, new-laid eggs. She ran back to the store-bins to get their corn. While she was carrying a watering-can to refill the drinking troughs, Roddy passed her on the tractor, with Pete beside him. The harrow clanked behind them as Roddy waved cheerfully.

Next, Kitty went up to the dairy where Jane was helping to clean the cooler.

'Done?' she asked.

Jane nodded. 'Just half a minute, and then I'll help you with those daffs.'

The girls picked two armfuls of the golden trumpets. They sorted them into bunches of twelve, tied them with raffia and carried them to their bicycles, carefully lifting the blooms into the handlebar baskets.

Skipper trotted into the harness room at that moment, and he put his head on one side as though to say: 'May I come with you?'

'We'll take Skipper,' Kitty decided. 'He can run along the side of the cycle track on the arterial road – well away from the traffic, and I'll

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push my bike and keep him to heel in the town.'

Jane was about to say no, but she happened to catch sight of Skipper's pleading brown eyes.

'Ah, well,' she gave in, 'since he knows his kerb drill, I suppose he deserves to come, and at least he'll be able to guard our bikes while we call at the shops. But bring his lead, Kit.'

About an hour later they left Skipper sitting by their bicycles, which they propped against a lamp-post near the Posy Bowl florist's shop in the nearby town of Minton.

'Sit!' Jane ordered the Alsatian.

Each carrying a sample bunch of daffodils they entered the shop. The owner – a keen-eyed, grey-haired lady in a tweedy costume – wouldn't even look at their blooms. She explained that the shop already had all the daffodils they needed. Supplies came each day from Covent Garden. The daffodil season was almost over so far as the florists were concerned.

'The flowers will soon be opening in local gardens,' she told Kitty and Jane. 'People don't want to buy daffodils when they pick them in their own gardens. The big demand now is for tulips and irises. You have to keep one jump ahead of the season when you're in the flower trade. I'm sorry. Good morning.'

'Never mind,' Kitty said to Jane, as they went

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back to their bikes and the waiting Skipper. 'Let's try the market stalls in the Town Square.'

'Yes, dearies,' smiled a plump woman who was in charge of a flower, fruit and vegetable stall. 'Give me half a dozen bunches – seeing as you say they're fresh-picked this morning. Here!' She counted out some money. 'Fourpence a bunch. How's that? I can't give you any more, and that's the truth. If I get any left on my hands, I'll be making a loss, see.'

'Fair enough!' said Kitty, trying to hide her disappointment that the daffodils had to be sold so cheaply.

A moment later Jane was gazing thoughtfully at the flowers in vases in the windows of the Red Lion Residential Hotel.

'I wonder!' she said, and went to speak to a maid who was cleaning the brass panels on the swing doors.

'I don't think you'll do any good, love.' The maid shrugged when Jane said she'd like to sell flowers to the hotel. 'The manageress is a tartar. Bite your head off as soon as look at you. No, ducks, take my tip. Give this place a miss. But I'll tell you what: try selling them to the girls at the Well-fit shoe factory up Drawbridge Street? They come out at twelve. If you're nippy you'll just catch them.'

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A few minutes later Kitty and Jane propped their bicycles near the factory gates.

'Buy our daffodils,' Jane called, holding out a specimen bunch, as the first work girls came out laughing and chattering a few minutes after the factory hooter had sounded.

'Only tenpence a bunch!' Kitty added with an even keener eye to business.

Some of the factory girls smiled at the sisters, but most of them didn't even look at the flowers. They were in a hurry to get home to have their lunch and make the most of their afternoon off.

'Lovely daffodils!' called out Kitty, shyly now.

Just then Skipper nudged his lead against her, as though to tell her that he didn't think this was a very good game.

'I know it isn't fun!' Kitty told him. 'You don't like to be left out of things, do you? You'd like to hold the basket, as you do when you carry the eggs. And that gives me an idea!'

Quickly she unstrapped her handlebar basket and held it out to Skipper. The Alsatian seemed puzzled because there was no handle, but he found that by holding his head down at an angle he could get his teeth round the edge of the basket.

'Honestly, Kit!' Jane sighed. 'Sometimes I think you're quite batty. You're making poor Skipper

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look a fool. What earthly good can that do?’

Kitty didn't say anything. She arranged some of the bunches so that they showed well above the basket and framed the Alsatian's head.

‘Beg, Skipper!’ she coaxed.

Skipper reared up, squatting on his back legs, still holding the basket.

‘Well, I never!’ exclaimed one work girl. ‘Just look at that dog.’

‘Did you ever see the like!’ said another, and soon there were half a dozen admirers around Skipper.

‘And what lovely daffs!’ said a kindly-eyed girl.



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'I wouldn't mind a bunch of them for my ma. How much are you asking?'

'Only tenpence a bunch!' Kitty called so everyone could hear.

'Oooh, I can afford two bunches at that price,' said the girl.

'I'll have one,' said another.

'Give me a specially nice one to take to my sister in hospital,' said yet another girl.

'Skipper, you wonder-dog!' Kitty told the Alsatian as the bunches were quickly sold. 'We needed a gimmick to help us sell the daffs – and you obliged!'

Skipper wagged. He was puzzled by it all. But he was glad that Kitty and Jane were happy again.

Within five minutes both baskets were empty, and their blazer pockets were heavy with silver and coppers.

'We've sold more than a pound's worth – a good morning's work, after all,' sighed Kitty. 'And there are flowers nearly all the year round in the garden.'

Jane nodded. 'Next week we'll bring primroses.'

'One moment, young ladies!' A brisk young man came out of the factory. 'Don't think I'm interfering,' he told Jane and Kitty. 'But I don't want you two girls to get into trouble with the police.'

'The police!' Kitty echoed.

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‘Yes, didn’t you know?’ The young man raised his eyebrows. ‘It’s against the law to hawk flowers without a street-trader’s licence.’

‘Oh, dear,’ groaned Kitty. ‘And all we’ve got is a dog licence for Skipper – and that’s in the dresser at the farm. We tried to sell the flowers to the shopkeepers,’ she added. ‘And to the hotels, but it just wasn’t any use.’

‘And we need to earn some money.’ Jane poured out the whole story and explained how they were in danger of having to give up Headland Farm. ‘It does seem a shame,’ she ended, ‘when we’ve got hundreds of flowers to spare at the farm.’

‘And our work people seem glad to buy them at a reasonable price.’ The young man looked thoughtful. Then, quite suddenly, he smiled. ‘I know how we can manage it. Suppose you bring the flowers here on Friday mornings. Then we could sell them in the canteen. You’ll get your money and our people will have the flowers –’ He looked from Kitty to Jane. ‘Would that do?’

‘Fine!’ Kitty’s eyes sparkled. ‘Thank you very much. We could bring them on our way to school.’

‘It is kind of you,’ Jane said gratefully. ‘Mr—’

‘Newton,’ smiled the young man. ‘I’m works manager here. Good morning.’

‘Good morning,’ Jane said in a daze.

‘And thank you,’ added Kitty.

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On the way back, they stopped at the iron-monger's.

'What are you going to do now?' Jane asked.

'Buy some flower seeds.' Kitty was doing mental arithmetic. 'Ten sixpenny packets sown now will yield five hundred per cent profit in the summer.'

'I'll come and help you choose them,' said Jane. 'How about some cornflowers for a start?'

Cornflowers, godetias, marigolds, clarkia, larkspur, annual chrysanthemums, corn-cockles, love-in-the-mist, love-lies-bleeding, cosmos – they chose all the easily grown flowers which lasted well in vases. Then, thoroughly pleased with themselves, they mounted their bicycles and rode home.

Ahead of them, as they turned into the lane that led to Headland Farm, was Pete. He was carrying a box with great care.

'What have you got there, Pete?' called Kitty.

'Eggs,' Pete said importantly. 'Bantam eggs.'



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It's my plan to help towards the profits of the farm. I've opened my money-box and bought a sitting of eggs from Mr Marsh, the poultry man in Sandy Lane. I'm putting them under the broody hen. Instead of trying to stop Betsey being broody, I thought you might lend her to me to hatch out these eggs.'

'But bantams!' Kitty and Jane were astonished. 'They'll lay such *small* eggs, Pete.'

'The packing station will buy them just the same,' said Pete. 'I got Roddy to look it up in one of the leaflets.'

'What if half the eggs hatch out as cockerels?' Jane asked. 'Bantams are too small to sell for the table.'

'They won't be sold to eat,' Pete explained, undaunted. 'I'm going to breed bantams – see—' He displayed the label on the box proudly. 'They're *pedigree* eggs.'

'Mr Marsh's bantams are the best in the county.' Kitty was getting enthusiastic. 'Good luck to you, Pete!'

'Now we're all doing something to help Dad, and the farm,' Pete said proudly.



CHAPTER THREE

NIGHT NOISES—AND A SHOCK

THAT afternoon Kitty helped Pete to settle Betsey, the hen, on the bantam eggs. They made her a cosy nest in a broody hen coop and arranged the eggs on the hay.

‘Super-duper!’ Pete whooped as he counted. ‘Mr Marsh has given me *thirteen* eggs, and I only paid him for a dozen. I wonder whether I ought to return the extra one.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Kitty. ‘I believe it’s a poultry breeders’ custom to give thirteen eggs to the dozen.’

‘And a jolly whizz custom, too!’ approved Pete. ‘Look!’ He gleefully watched the broody hen clucking with pleasure towards the coop. ‘Betsey thinks so, too!’

Kitty watched, fascinated, as the hen carefully

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fluffed out her feathers and settled contentedly on the nest to warm the eggs.

Pete gently put the barred front of the coop into position.

'We'll be back after tea to give you some food and let you walk round the loft for a few minutes, Betsey,' he promised the hen. 'Come on, Kitty. Let's have another look at Rusty. Ah, here's Skipper!' he added, as the Alsatian appeared round the hen coops. 'We'll take him to see his new pal.'

Kitty and Pete watched Rusty walk from his mother's side to greet Skipper. The big Alsatian wagged his tail and touched noses with Rusty in a gentle way. He seemed to realize that the foal was only a baby, and so, like all the young creatures on the farm, needed to be treated with tenderness.

'Tea!' Mrs Appleby called from the kitchen, and she banged a spoon on a tin tray so that everyone would hear.

Next morning Kitty ate her early morning snack of tasty bread and dripping from the pile on the kitchen dresser. Then with Skipper and Laddie, the black-and-white sheepdog, running ahead, she went out to attend to the hens. The ducks in the orchard looked fine. They waddled cheerfully out of their ark and, quacking happily, began to stamp their feet on the mud – a pro-

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cedure which somehow seemed to bring unsuspecting worms to the surface.

As Kitty neared the poultry houses at the bottom of the meadow, she knew that something must be wrong. Skipper and Laddie were barking and, from the end pen came an alarmed clucking. She saw with dismay that there was a gap in the wire-netting. The poultry house door was swinging open. She peered inside.

How absolutely dreadful, she thought, as she saw bodies of dead hens, mangled by some cruel fox. She counted the birds that were still alive. Twelve hens – out of thirty-six.

She felt sickened. Poor, poor hens. And what a blow for Daddy – at a time when every set-back increased the risk of losing the farm.



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She shook her fist towards Birch Spinney. What a thoroughly villainous fox he must be! He had wantonly killed two dozen hens when he could carry off and eat only one. But that was the way of most foxes.

Wasn't there any sure means of keeping him out of the poultry houses? Kitty carefully examined the door. She had fastened it last night by slotting a wedge of wood through the hasp. Now the wedge was lying on the ground. The fox must have drawn it out with his teeth, and then pulled the door open with his front paws.

'We'll have to fix that door with wire – or, better still, with padlocks,' Kitty decided, and ran to tell the others the bad news.

Right away, Mr Appleby and Roddy carried tools and wire down to the poultry houses and began to strengthen the 'barriers' around the poultry houses, until it seemed almost impossible that the fox could make another raid.

'Though, goodness knows, I'd have thought it difficult enough for him to get that door open in the first place,' Mr Appleby said grimly at lunch-time, and his eyes moved towards his unloaded gun that stood at the side of the grandfather clock.

Kitty lay in bed dreaming that the farm was overrun by a family of giant foxes. She woke with

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a start just as she dreamt she had managed to slam the coal-house door on one of the prowling foxes. She sat up in bed. A wind was roaring in the bedroom chimney, and somewhere a door really was banging. Somebody must have left it open, and now the wind had risen. That banging door would waken everybody unless she went downstairs to shut it.

Along the landing she met Roddy, on the same mission. They hurried downstairs and found it was the back-door that was banging in the wind, not the coal-house door, as Kitty had dreamt.

‘That’s queer!’ Roddy exclaimed. ‘Whoever could have left it open? Daddy would be the last to come to bed, and he’s always careful to bolt it.’

As Kitty pulled on a mac and Wellingtons she saw, through the open doorway, a gleam of light from the window in the loft above the harness room.

‘What in the world!’ Roddy gasped as she pointed.

Silently they sped through the moonlight, across the farmyard, opened the harness room door, and climbed the creaky staircase to the loft.

‘Goodness!’ Kitty gasped, reaching the top of the stairs. ‘Just look!’

They stared across the dimly lit loft. There, fully dressed, sitting upright on an upturned box

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by the broody hen coop, and fast asleep, was Pete. Beside him was the storm lantern. Nearby, Skipper was stretched out on the floor, also asleep. As Roddy trod on a loose floorboard, Skipper opened one eye. Next minute he was on his feet barking.

‘Steady on, Skipper!’ Kitty said, patting him. ‘It’s only us.’

The Alsatian stopped barking, and shook the sleep from his head. His tail wagged apologetically. Pete sat up with a jerk and opened his eyes.

‘What’s happening?’ he demanded sleepily. ‘Hey, Skipper—catch that fox!’

‘You are a prize chump, Pete!’ Roddy exclaimed. ‘Whatever are you talking about?’

‘He’s still dreaming!’ groaned Kitty.

‘Oh, gosh! Oh, golly!’ Pete thumped his head as though he were annoyed with himself. ‘I must have fallen asleep. And I wanted to keep awake so that Skipper could catch the fox. I wanted to help Daddy – and to save Betsey and the bantam eggs.’

‘If only you’d told us what you were up to!’ Roddy groaned. He glared almost sternly at Skipper and Pete. ‘Fine watch-dogs you two are – both sleeping so soundly that you never even heard the back door banging enough to waken the dead!’

‘I mustn’t have latched it when I crept out.’ Pete



felt like kicking himself. He broke off and suddenly looked excited. 'Shut up, everybody, Skipper's seen something.'

Ears pricked, tail quivering, Skipper whined as he pawed at the cobwebby window pane. The three Applebys rushed to his side.

'Look!' Kitty pointed to the poultry houses. 'The fox!'

'The crafty wretch!' Roddy gasped. 'He's bouncing up and down on the wire-netting roof to make it sag, so that the joins will gape wide enough for him to drop through.'

Roddy ran to the loft door. 'After him, Skipper!' he urged.

The white Alsatian thudded downstairs, streaked across the yard, jumped the fence and disappeared into the darkness. The three Applebys followed. Pete bumped into Kitty.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Sorry! And oh, blow! The moon's gone in, and we can't see anything!' he gasped. 'And I've left the storm lantern in the loft.'

'Not so much noise!' whispered Roddy, hurrying across the yard. He cracked his shins on a water trough. 'Ouch! I wish I could see what was going on—'

He broke off. Through the darkness rang the sharp report of a gun-shot, followed almost immediately by Skipper's barking.

As the Applebys listened in horror, the barking broke off in a whine. Now there was only a creepy silence. Then the darkness of the night was broken by the moan of the wind in the chimney cowl.

There was no further sound from Skipper wherever he was.

Kitty shuddered. 'Someone's out there with a gun,' she said, her voice full of dread. 'And he's shot Skipper! I'm sure of it. Skipper! Oh, Skipper!'

'Skipper!'

'Skipper!'

The three Applebys plunged forward, calling their dog's name. No longer did they care whether they woke the household, or whether they warned the marauding fox. Their only thought was for their dog.

Night noises – and a shock

‘Roddy! Kitty!’ Suddenly a stern voice rang through the night – their father’s.

‘Daddy! What’s happened?’ Kitty called out. ‘Where are you?’

A beam from Mr Appleby’s torch suddenly shone through the night. He appeared from behind the hay-rick, near the hen pens, his gun under his arm.

‘What are you children doing here?’ he demanded sternly.

‘We were trying to get Skipper to hunt the fox, Dad,’ explained Roddy. ‘We didn’t know you’d be out here with the gun.’

‘I’ve been behind that rick, waiting for that fox, since dusk,’ Mr Appleby groaned, ‘and I’d have shot him if you three hadn’t made enough noise to scare all the foxes into the next county—’

‘But Skipper?’ Kitty interrupted desperately. ‘Did – did you shoot him?’

‘Shoot him?’ Mr Appleby looked blank. ‘I left Skipper safely locked up in the kitchen before I set out. And I took Laddie from his kennel and put him in the parlour, so that he wouldn’t bark when the fox prowled round.’

‘But Pete came out after that, with Skipper,’ gasped Roddy. ‘And we came afterwards. Skipper chased the fox just before your shot. What’s happened to him. Where is he?’

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Skipper!' Mr Appleby shouted into the darkness, and broke into a run. 'I saw something flash past. I thought it was the fox, and it struck me it was rather white – *Skipper!*'

After many shouts they waited, listening. Kitty felt Pete's hand grasping hers for comfort. She knew they were all thinking the same – including Daddy. If only they could once more hear Skipper's panting as he scampered nearer. Why didn't he come? She'd never known Skipper disobey an order. He must have heard all their yelling. He would answer, if he could.

Mr Appleby shone the torch beam from side to side as they made their way towards Birch Spinney.

'Perhaps you and Pete had better go back to the house,' he said, and his voice was strangely gruff. 'Roddy and I will carry on looking.'

'You think you've shot him!' Kitty said to her father in an unsteady voice. 'And you don't want us to be there when you find him. Well, we're not going back—'

'Shut up, Kit!' Pete broke in rudely. 'Listen!'

From behind a clump of gorse, half-way to Birch Spinney, came a small whimper. They rushed there, and saw – lit up by Mr Appleby's torch – Skipper crouching against a rock. His coat was muddy, and he was trembling. He looked at them dolefully.



‘At least, he’s alive!’ Kitty gasped in relief, though she was shocked by his appearance. ‘But what’s wrong with him?’

‘Skipper! Come here, lad!’ Mr Appleby called. ‘I won’t hurt you.’

Slowly, paw after paw, with head down, Skipper walked to his master.

Mr Appleby knelt beside him, and gently ran his hands all over him, trying to find a wound, and watching to see if he flinched when he was touched.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Well, thank our lucky stars!' Mr Appleby exclaimed. 'I missed him. He hasn't got a mark on him, but – bless me! – why's he acting in this odd way?'

'It's guilt!' Roddy suddenly whooped as the moon came from behind a cloud. 'Look!' He pointed to a russet shape, lying near the gorse – 'the fox!' Roddy picked it up by its bushy brush, and it hung limply. 'Skipper killed the fox after all. But he didn't know whether he'd done right – particularly after he heard all our shouting. Perhaps he thought we were angry with him.'

'Skipper – oh, you darling!' exclaimed Kitty.

All three Applebys tried to hug Skipper at once, and Mr Appleby smiled proudly down at him.

'Good dog!' he said over and over again. '*Good, Skipper!*'

At last Skipper wagged and gave one of his especially happy barks, before trotting joyfully beside them to the farmhouse.



CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT A STORM!

BACK to school. . . ! During a boring patch in the morning history class some weeks later, Kitty found herself worrying about Headland Farm instead of keeping her mind on the Norman Conquest.

Would the time come when they might have to sell Rusty for the ready money he might fetch? Or, perhaps, if he did well in the August agricultural show, her father might decide it would be profitable to keep him. Dapple was a pure-bred Welsh mare, and Rusty's father had been a champion, sponsored by the Breed Improvement Society. So Rusty might grow up to be a valuable pony stallion.

'Kitty Appleby!' Miss Jameson, the history mistress, sounded stern. 'You're wool-gathering again!'

Kitty found it even more difficult to keep her mind on triangles, whether right-angled or obtuse; during Miss Forbes' geometry lesson that after-

Skipper and the Headland Four

noon. Only a few weeks of the term had dragged by, yet Kitty was already thinking: 'Roll on the summer holidays when Roddy, Jane, Pete and I will be able to work all day long to save the farm.'

She looked wistfully out of the window, across the cricket pitch to the open countryside beyond. A heat haze seemed to shimmer over everywhere. What a hot, muggy sort of day it was – not a breath of air. Even Miss Forbes, for once, didn't seem to care very deeply about Pythagoras and his celebrated theorem.

At last school was over for the day, and Kitty was running for the bus. She sat next to Jane on the front seat, and Roddy got on the bus when it stopped at the gates of the boys' grammar school.

The sky was now overcast, and there was a flash of lightning.

'A storm's on the way,' Roddy said, and just before the bus started again, a clap of thunder rolled across the sky.

'Oh dear!' Kitty said, thinking of the foal. 'I do hope Rusty won't be frightened.'

Rain fell heavily. Lightning crackled, in forked flashes now, and the thunder was frightening.

'The storm's not quite overhead – *yet!*' Roddy declared. 'Beats me how the driver can steer in this blinding rain.'

Kitty glanced at her watch. It would be another

What a storm!

ten minutes before they would be home. The heavy rain became a torrent. It poured over the windscreen of the bus like a waterfall. The driver pulled up. He slid back the little window behind his seat and called out: 'We'll have to wait a while. But we're all safe and snug. Who's going to start a sing-song?'

'To plough and sow, to reap and mow,' began Roddy lustily.

'And be a farmer's boy!' yelled everyone else except Kitty.

She turned desperately to Jane. 'I just can't sit here and sing!' she shouted above the uproar. 'I've got to see if Rusty's all right. I'm going to get off and run across the fields.'

'Not in this deluge!' Jane protested. 'You'll be drowned—'

The thunder crackled and the lightning flashed — all at the same time. The storm was now directly overhead.

'I can't do anything else.' Kitty stood up and lifted her schoolbag from the rack. 'Rusty might be struck by lightning.'

'You might, more likely,' Roddy reasoned. 'Wait a little while, Kitty. It's sure to go off soon.'

'I can't risk it,' Kitty said. 'We might be stuck here for another hour. The rain's coming down faster than ever.'

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'Oh, very well, we'll come with you,' Roddy groaned, turning up his blazer collar and following Kitty down the steps.

'Hey, come back! You can't walk home in this,' protested the driver as Jane followed the others.

'*And be a farmer's boy!*' yelled the bus load of singers.

Head down, Jane plunged through the rain after Kitty and Roddy to the stile. The squelching, sticky mud almost pulled off their shoes. The children slipped and staggered while the rain blinded and chilled them. Doggedly they kept on, and only paused when they came to the brook. It was foaming like a torrent, and some of the stepping stones were well below the water.

'Here goes!' said Roddy wading into the torrent up to his knees. 'We can't get much wetter than we already are.'

Jane laughed as she followed, but Kitty was too worried about the foal to see anything funny about it. Rusty was out in this terrible storm. Daddy was at market, so he couldn't have taken Rusty and Dapple into the stable. They must be in the open, terrified.

Lightning flashed as she flung her satchel through the back doorway when they reached the farmhouse. Roddy's schoolbag thudded after it;

What a storm!

so did Jane's. Without pausing, they ran across to the Home Field.

Through the rain Kitty saw the mackintosh-clad figure of her mother. By her side was Pete in his cycle cape, sou'wester and Wellingtons.

'Mummy! Pete!' Kitty shouted above the storm. 'I ought to have known Pete would get home from school earlier than us, and that you'd both cope with Dapple and Rusty.'

'Yes, I came out to them as soon as the storm threatened,' Mrs Appleby shouted back. 'But there was sudden thunder and lightning and — oh, Kitty, they'd already bolted!'

'Oh, dear!' Kitty gasped, darting to a gap in the hedge. 'They must have been scared out of their wits to break their way through here!' She pointed to Dapple's hoofprints and the smaller, unshod marks of the foal in the mud at the other side of the hedge. 'Dapple must have pushed her way right through the hedge, so that she'd make a gap for Rusty. She was trying to lead him away from danger. Now which way would she go?'

'Perhaps up to the hills,' Roddy suggested.

'We'll get the ponies and go after them,' Kitty decided, running towards the farm buildings. 'Catch Prince and Darkie, Jane . . . I'm going for the bridles.'

'Bring a halter for Dapple,' Roddy shouted after

Skipper and the Headland Four

her. He turned to his mother. 'I'll go with the girls on Captain.' He spoke to the youngest Appleby. 'Stay here, young Pete, and help Mum to get in the piglets.'

A few moments later Kitty loomed through the rain, carrying the bridles, as Jane came back with Prince. Captain and Darkie trotted behind.

Roddy buckled on the shire horse's bridle and scrambled on to his broad back. Jane mounted Prince and Kitty put a leg over Pete's Shetland, Darkie, and urged him to a canter. 'Come on, Darkie. Do your best.'

Darkie scrabbled through the gap. Prince jumped the hedge beside him, while Captain lumbered behind.

'Up, Captain!' Roddy coaxed, leaning forward.

He gave the shire horse an encouraging slap. Captain heaved himself over, and thundered willingly after Prince and Darkie.

Kitty bent low, trying to see ahead, longing to catch sight of Dapple and Rusty again. Where were they? Had the foal come to any harm?



CHAPTER FIVE

‘RUSTY! WHERE ARE YOU?’

‘LOOK – hoofprints!’ shouted Roddy, fifteen minutes later. Still mounted, he pointed to the sodden ground. ‘We’re on the trail.’

‘Goodness, what a climb!’ Kitty panted as Darkie scabbled up the steeply rising slope. ‘Whatever made Dapple take Rusty up here?’

‘Instinct,’ Roddy said, jumping down to help Captain over the slippery ground. ‘I s’pose her wild ancestors would often seek the rocky, sheltered places among the hills during stormy weather. So Dapple did the same.’

‘I wish she’d led Rusty to the stable!’ Jane said feelingly. ‘Ugh! The rain’s running down the back of my neck.’

A few minutes later the rain stopped, and – a long time after the last lightning flash – a roll of thunder sounded distantly. The storm had passed.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Now which way?' puzzled Kitty as they came to a flatter, sparsely-wooded stretch half-way up the hill. 'The track forks here – and it's stony ground both ways. So there aren't any hoofprints.'

She broke off as Darkie whinnied and turned his head to look down to the headland. The rain was still sweeping across it, and as the sun broke through, a rainbow formed a brilliant arc over Headland Farm.

'A crock of gold should lie buried in Rusty's meadow where the rainbow ends. What a hope!' said Jane with a sigh. 'Hello!' she suddenly exclaimed. 'So that's what Darkie's looking at – there's Skipper!'

'Skipper!' Kitty called the dog before saying to the others: 'He's following our tracks. Look his nose is to the ground.'

'We're here, Skipper!' shouted Roddy.

The Alsatian stopped and looked. He suddenly saw them and came bounding up the steepest part of the hill.

Meanwhile Kitty looked thoughtfully at the forked path. Which way? They must find Rusty before something terrible happened to him. The hills were full of pitfalls for a frightened foal.

'Look – there's Pete!' said Jane, in excitement. 'About fifty yards behind Skipper.' She jumped on to a rock and waved. 'Hey, Pete! We're here.'

'Rusty! Where are you?'

Skipper reached them after a few moments. He lay on the grass, panting as he waited for Pete.

Skipper and Pete had tackled a steep climb in order to take a short cut to the others who – because of the ponies and Captain – had been forced to keep to the twisting hill paths.

'Phew! I'm puffed!' gasped Pete, as he staggered the last few yards. Then, with an effort, he gasped breathlessly: 'I'd have come sooner, but I had to move my rabbits into the loft. The run was partly under water, because one of the yard grids got clogged up. Lop-Ears and Cotton-Tail were trapped on an island!'

'Well, what have you come to tell us?' Kitty asked, in suspense.

Pete gasped for breath. 'What about?'

'Rusty and Dapple, of course,' Kitty said, in exasperation. 'I thought you'd hared here to tell us they'd come back to the farm.'

'No such luck,' said Pete. 'I just wanted to help. I brought Skipper, too. He'd been sleeping in the loft, and——'

'And now we can put him to work,' said Kitty, getting off Darkie's back.

'That's what I thought,' Pete said brightly. 'Look, I've brought Rusty's brush. His scent will be on it.'

'Good for you, Pete!' Kitty exclaimed. She

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grabbed the brush from her young brother, and held it under Skipper's nose. 'I hope it works!'

The dog was still panting too much to be able to sniff just yet. Then he smelled the brush and his plummy tail gave a half-wag. He tried to take the brush in his teeth.

'No, Skipper,' said Kitty. 'I want you to seek. *Seek!*'

Skipper put his head on one side. He ran a few yards and barked, as though to say: 'Yes, throw it and I'll fetch it for you.'

'Bother!' Kitty exclaimed, in exasperation. 'Skipper thinks we want him to carry the brush.'

She broke off. Skipper was now sniffing along the ground. They watched him tensely. Would he be able to pick up Rusty's scent after the heavy rain?

He hesitated at the fork of the paths. Suddenly he loped down the right-handed path, and at the bend, just before darting out of sight, he looked back and barked for the others to follow.

'Three cheers for Skipper!' Kitty exclaimed, mounting Darkie and leading the rescue team. 'And good for you, Pete!'

They rode over the hill, following close behind Skipper. The streams were in full spate, and soon the four children were riding squelchily through marshy ground.

'Thank goodness!' Kitty gasped, hardly believing what she saw.

On the far side of a water-logged hollow, between two hill-ocks, were Dapple and Rusty. They were grazing happily, and it seemed that they had



been sheltered from the worst of the storm by a wind-break of thorn bushes on the south-west side.

'Well, I never!' exclaimed Jane. 'We brought Dapple here when we had a picnic one windy day last summer. Dapple must have remembered what a safe, sheltered place this is. That's why she led Rusty here when the storm began.'

'Sheltered yes, but I'm not sure about it being *safe*,' Roddy said, warily looking at the boggy ground towards the middle of the hollow.

'Rusty! Hey, Rusty!' Kitty called coaxingly, and immediately regretted it when the foal began trotting towards her, taking the shortest route – through the bog!

Kitty ran forward, waving her arms, trying to make him stop. Dapple, knowing the danger,

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galloped to overtake the foal and lead him away from the unsafe ground.

'Oh, please, Rusty! Stop!' Kitty pleaded.

'Shut up, everybody!' Roddy ordered. 'He thinks we're still calling him.'

Kitty desperately looked about her. Could she ride round the bog in time to prevent Rusty plunging straight across? She turned Darkie and cantered him away to the left, trying to get Rusty to change his direction.

Still Rusty came on, his hooves sinking in the treacherous mud.

Now Dapple drew ahead of him, baring her teeth and threatening to bite in an attempt to stop him. Rusty turned and cantered away on to firm ground, and Pete grabbed him. Meanwhile – too late – Dapple tried to pull herself out of the mud. She dragged one leg free only to fall on her side and sink up to her neck. She had saved her foal, but she'd had to run into the bog to do it.

'Dapple's drowning!' Kitty rounded the end of the bog and galloped over the dry ground as Dapple sank deeper. 'Roddy! Jane! Help!'

Roddy urged Captain to a gallop. Jane drew level, jumping down from Prince, and running to help Kitty who was up to her knees in the bog, trying to hold Dapple's head clear of the mud.

Roddy unbuckled the long driving reins from

'Rusty! Where are you?'

Captain's bridle. He took Darkie's reins and Prince's and began to buckle them together to form one long strap. Luckily, Prince's bridle was a double one, and the result was a leather rope about twenty-six feet long. Roddy passed one end to Kitty.

'Buckle it behind Dapple's shoulders,' he instructed. He turned to the Alsatian who pawed at his hand for orders. 'You've done your bit, Skipper. Sit! We'll let you know when we need you.'

The water was now up to Kitty's waist. Her feet were firmly embedded in the sucking mud of the bog. She struggled on gamely – plunging her arms into the mud and water, and getting the strap round Dapple's shoulders.

Jane and Roddy pulled Kitty free. Then the three of them gripped the leather rope of reins to form a tug-of-war team.

'Heave!' Roddy ordered. 'All together now. One, two, three – *heave!*'

'She's coming,' Kitty gasped too soon because, next moment, Dapple's legs were sucked back into the bog. Kitty looked desperate. 'We can't manage it. We're not strong enough. But there ought to be something else we can do to save Dapple – *something!*'



CHAPTER SIX

A PONY'S COURAGE

'THIS is a job for Captain!' Roddy quickly decided.

Patiently the seventeen-hand shire horse let Roddy lead him to the end of the bog. Roddy buckled the reins round his shoulders.

'Now then,' he urged, holding Captain's cheek-piece. **'Gee up!'**

Captain struggled to obey the order, but his big hooves kept on slipping on the muddy ground.

Kitty tore off her mac and blazer and threw them under Captain's skidding hooves.

A pony's courage

'Up now!' urged Roddy, tugging at Captain's cheek-piece. 'Jolly good, Kit. That's doing the trick!'

The mac and blazer helped Captain to get a grip with his hooves. He heaved and Dapple lurched forward. Kitty noticed that the mare's eyes brightened as she felt herself being dragged out of the mud. Captain gave another heave. With a sucking sound Dapple was pulled free. She sank to her knees on the firm ground.

'Brave Dapple,' Kitty murmured, realizing that the pony-mare had deliberately galloped into the bog to head Rusty away from the danger.

Dapple got up, trembling. Rusty, who had been watching, puzzled and afraid, a little way off, trotted up to his mother. She licked him and then began to shiver. Skipper, still sitting as Roddy had ordered, managed to wag his tail in joy, while the Applebys watched in relief.

'The danger's not over,' Roddy said a moment later. 'Dapple's in for a chill.' He made a pad of his handkerchief and began to rub Dapple's ears. 'Come on, everybody. Rub her as hard as you can.'

Kitty and Jane and Pete made rough wisps of bracken and heather and massaged the shivering Dapple, one on either side. Then Kitty threw her muddy mac and blazer over the mare's back and put on Dapple's halter.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Ride on ahead and get the stable ready,' she told Jane and Roddy. 'Have a look at Daddy's horse book and find out what we ought to do. I'll lead her slowly home. Rusty's bound to follow.'

But the time they reached Headland Farm Dapple was tottering with weariness. She was still shivering and her eyes were watery.

Jane ran across the field to meet them as Kitty and Darkie came into sight. She was leading Dapple while Rusty followed. 'I've made a bran mash and Mummy's mixed some whisky and milk.'

In the stable Kitty pulled up the mare's head and gently held open her mouth while Mrs Appleby poured the mixture down her throat. Dapple gulped it down, and a moment later, turned her head interestedly as Roddy brought in the bucket of bran mash.

'Put on as many rugs as you can find,' Mrs Appleby told them. 'She must be kept warm. Leave Rusty with her so that she won't fret. Now, come out of the way, all of you. There's nothing more we can do for the moment.'

As soon as Mr Appleby came back from market Kitty took him to look at the invalid.

'She's wheezy,' her father said, after listening to her breathing. 'That's not a good sign. We'll have to give her the "steam-treatment".'

A pony's courage

Mr Appleby put some bran in a bucket while Kitty fetched a kettle from the kitchen and poured boiling water on it. Then Mr Appleby covered Dapple's head with a blanket and stood the bucket under her nose so that she could breathe in the steam to ease her wheeziness. Meanwhile Kitty put a halter on Rusty and led him outside.

Rusty had never before worn a halter and he was rather young to learn to lead, Kitty knew. But he followed quite well, except for nibbling at her sleeve once or twice, and almost pushing her over in his excitement at being out-of-doors again.

'Good Rusty!' Kitty said, making a fuss of him.

'Bring the foal back now,' Mr Appleby called after a while. 'Dapple's breathing seems easier.

We'll have to keep her in for a while to make sure she doesn't take cold again.'

'Thanks for being such a help,' Kitty told him gratefully. 'You're a daddy in a million.'

Mr Appleby only grunted, but



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Kitty had a feeling that he was pleased. All the same, he still had that *worried* look.

'Money worries, I bet,' Kitty thought. 'We've tried to help, but things have still gone wrong. More expense all the time. My blazer and mac! But I won't let Daddy buy new ones! I'll patch the mac with sticking plaster where it's torn. If I put it on the inside, it won't show. And Jane can invisibly mend my blazer. She's a wizard with her needle.'

Skipper walked up to her: then meaningfully trotted to his empty bowl.

'Oh, poor Skipper! In all the excitement no one's remembered to feed you,' Kitty said. 'After you'd tracked down Dapple and Rusty so cleverly, too.'

With the Alsatian at her heels, she hurried to the harness room where Laddie, the farmyard collie, was sitting hopefully 'guarding' the old pressure cooker in which was kept the cooked dog meat.

'Faith and patience,' Kitty said with a smile as she looked at the two dogs. 'I think you both deserve extra helpings.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

SECRETS AND A BRAINWAVE

DAPPLE'S wheeziness soon went, and, before long, she was out in the field again with Rusty cantering by her side, galloping from the pool to the orchard hedge and back, his little hooves drumming and his mane and short tail streaming in the breeze.

The days slipped by, and soon Pete's chicks were due to hatch. Betsey, the hen, always tried to send him off, pecking and clucking because she thought he might have come to take her beloved eggs away from her. By now she had begun to imagine that she had actually laid them.

When Kitty, Jane and Roddy got off the bus from school one evening, Pete and Skipper were waiting for them. Pete still went to the school in the village of Sand Beach nearby, and so he got home earlier than the others. By the time the Minton bus reached the farm-gate he had a lot to tell them.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Come and see,' he burst out eagerly. 'Two chicks have hatched and three more eggs are chipping.'

'Jolly good, Pete!' Roddy bent to pat Skipper who was wondering what all the excitement was about.

With his hand on the Alsatian's collar, Pete led the way up the stairs to the loft. 'Sit, Skipper!' he told the dog when they came to the top. The dog waited, head stretched forward, to watch the two chicks nestling between Betsey's feet. Another chick was cheeping and flapping its wings, having just emerged from the egg-shell.

'Aren't they pretty?' Kitty said, thrilled. 'I wonder if any more have hatched yet and are keeping warm under Betsey.'

Pete gently scattered some corn on to the floor near the coop. He raised the barred front so that Betsey could leave the nest. She fussed forward to peck the grain and the four Applebys craned to see the eggs on which she had been sitting. Another chick was just struggling from a broken shell! All the eggs were now showing cracks. Above the *cheep-cheep* of the newly hatched chicks, the children could even hear the tapping of those chicks which were still inside their eggs as they pecked the shells with their beaks, trying to chip their way to the big world beyond.

Secrets and a brainwave

‘How lovely, Pete,’ Kitty said. ‘It seems as though a chick is going to come from every egg. Well done, Betsey, for being such a good mother! Whatever will you do with all these chicks, Pete?’

‘I decided that before they’d even hatched out,’ Pete said with a chuckle. ‘I’ll rear all the cockerels and sell them to other bantam breeders. I’ll keep one, of course, as a husband for the pullets. I’ll keep all the hen birds, too, and, when they begin to lay, I’ll collect the eggs and put them in Daddy’s incubator. This time next year I’ll have twenty or thirty bantams – probably more. I’ll sell them, and I bet anything you like that people are sure to want to buy them because they’re such a good strain.’

‘In fact the fortunes of Headland Farm are as good as made,’ teased Kitty.

Her expression became thoughtful. How was the farm doing? Well, there had been the loss of the hens killed by the fox. On the credit side there were three heifer calves; two litters of pink, porky piglets; a pen of thriving turkey chicks; Pete’s bantams; five pounds, seventeen shillings from the weekly sale of flowers to the work people at the shoe factory canteen; and of course – Rusty! Yes, Rusty. Her eyes became dreamy. She had big hopes of him.

Skipper and the Headland Four

At tea next day, Mr Appleby got up from his chair to carve the cold boiled ham while Mrs Appleby poured tea from the big brown pot, and the children helped themselves to bread and butter and salad.

'I had to go into Minton this afternoon,' Mr Appleby said as he wielded the carving knife and fork. 'To have a word with my bank manager—'

He paused here and Kitty and Jane exchanged forlorn glances. Daddy was looking very worried. 'Oh dear!' thought Kitty, 'I do hope he's not going to tell us that we've got to sell the farm, and that an auctioneer's coming with his horrid little hammer to say going – going – GONE over everything. Yes, everything – all plastered with sticky labels.' She glanced round the kitchen. 'That grandfather clock, the Welsh dresser – all to be sold!' She looked up and – in her mind's eye – she saw beyond the beamed ceiling. 'My cosy bed and the candlewick bedspread. But, worse still! – Dapple, and Captain and Prince – and young Rusty. Pete's bantams, and rabbits, and Darkie—'

She half-turned her head to look at Laddie, to include him in her sad list, but her father was speaking again.

'It seems a client of his is Mr Newton, from the shoe factory——' Here he looked straight at

Secrets and a brainwave

Jane and Kitty. 'Mr. Newton told him about my "two enterprising daughters" and their flower trade.' He stopped and his worried expression changed to a slightly hurt one. 'Why didn't you two let me know what you were doing?'

'Well, Dad,' Jane suddenly said, 'we wouldn't have had any secrets – if you and Mummy hadn't kept your own secret from us.'

'What do you mean by that?' Mrs Appleby asked in surprise.

'You didn't tell us that the farm was doing so badly that everything might have to be sold,' Jane added impulsively. 'But I overheard it. That's why we've all been doing extra jobs, and why Pete's raising bantams, and Roddy's taking orders for lobsters, and Kitty and I are selling flowers. We're putting the money in the post-office savings bank for you.'

Mr and Mrs Appleby exchanged amazed glances.

'And I thought you were doing it all for extra pocket-money,' Mr Appleby said quietly. 'Well, it seems as though I owe you four children an apology.'

'Oh, that's all right, Daddy,' said Kitty.

'All pulling together makes things easier in any family,' Mr Appleby went on. 'But you're only children, you know; and you can't be expected to take on grown-up worries. That's why your

Skipper and the Headland Four

mother and I didn't tell you about the farm's money losses.'

'Besides, you've got quite enough on your plates,' Mrs Appleby added, and made a rueful joke: 'And I don't only mean boiled ham. There's your schoolwork and exams and homework.'

'We'll soon be breaking up for the holidays,' pointed out Pete. 'Then we can *really* help. Besides, it's fun. Helping on the farm is like play – not work.'

'Yes, we love it, Daddy,' said Kitty. 'So please let Jane and me go on selling the flowers.'

'From now on we'll tell you *everything* we're doing, Dad,' promised Roddy. 'And, in return – no secrets by you and Mummy.'

'We've a *right* to know what's going on,' said Jane, and added in a strangely grown-up way: 'The farm vitally concerns us all.'

'Your father and I have been thinking just that, every waking minute of the past few months,' Mrs Appleby sighed.

'Well, how are we doing?' Roddy demanded of his father. 'Tell us what you really think, man to man?'

Mr and Mrs Appleby looked at each other in silence, as though trying to make up their minds. Then Mrs Appleby nodded at her husband.

'We must know the whole truth,' Roddy insisted.

Secrets and a brainwave

'Well, it's hard to say.' Mr Appleby looked round at them all in turn. 'We're still in debt, and we've borrowed more money from the bank to carry us over until next harvest.'

'So what's going to happen?' Kitty asked.

'It's going to be touch and go,' Mr Appleby replied. 'And we shan't really know whether we'll have to sell up until after the harvest.'

There was a moment's dreadful silence, broken only by a *thud-thud-thud* from Skipper who was scratching his head with his back paw.

'So it all depends on the harvest,' said Roddy.

'And whether we have any more bad luck - fowl-pest, swine-fever, foot-and-mouth.' Mr Appleby tried to shrug. 'Every farmer faces those risks. But the knock-out blow sometimes comes when all the calamities happen together.'

'What will the harvest be?' sighed Jane. 'If only we knew!'

'Now don't you all start worrying - or you'll make your mother and me downhearted,' Mr Appleby said, with a laugh. For a moment, he looked his old cheerful self. 'Just when I'm feeling all the better for the way you've faced up to the facts. A trouble shared is a trouble halved. Now eat your tea - and stop pulling such long faces.'

That night when Kitty went to her father's chair and put her arms round him to kiss him good

Skipper and the Headland Four

night, she told him: 'Even if we lose the farm and the animals – including Rusty, and have to live with Great-Aunt Margaret, I'll love you just as much. It isn't your fault. You're still the best daddy in the world.'

As she kissed her mother, she added: 'And you're the best mummy anyone could have.'

Just before she fell asleep she heard her father whistling as he went out to shut up the pigs. 'I haven't heard Daddy whistling like that for ages,' she thought. 'Oh, I'm glad he found out that we knew his secret. And I'm *not* going to worry, nor have a long face. I'm going to work and hope – and be brave whatever happens.'

She shut her eyes tightly because she kept on seeing, in her imagination, Rusty trotting round the field in the sun and Dapple grazing nearby, and she couldn't bear to think how dreadful it would be to be parted from them.

'There! How does that look?' Roddy asked the following Friday evening as the other three Applebys and Skipper stood back to inspect. 'Imagine you're somebody out for an afternoon walk and feeling hungry. Would that notice tempt you?'

Kitty looked at the board that Roddy had just screwed on to the trunk of the big chestnut tree that stood at the end of the lane.



An arrow pointed up the lane to Headland Farm.

Kitty read the notice aloud. 'Jolly good!' she said. 'It makes me feel hungry just to look at it. I think it was a whizz idea of Mummy's.'

'No one would guess that the notice-board was only a piece of an old stable door, squared up and painted white,' said Roddy.

'And your lettering's not too bad, Jane,' put in Pete. 'Except that your S's are a bit squiggly.'

'I wanted to paint it all out with white paint and have another shot,' said Jane. 'But Roddy said the paint wouldn't be dry in time for the week-end rush.'

'Roll on to-morrow tea-time!' whooped Pete. 'I bet we do well.'

On Saturday morning Mrs Appleby was busy baking home-made scones and jam tarts to add to the three fruit-cakes she had made the day before.

Skipper and the Headland Four

Kitty and Jane worked hard, washing the best willow-pattern china, arranging bluebells and beech leaves in the vases, and carrying chairs into the parlour. By four o'clock everything was ready.

At ten past four Pete caught sight of two tweed-clad women striding up the lane to the farm.

'Our first two customers,' he reported, rushing into the kitchen.

Kitty ran to the window to look.

'Oh, dear!' she groaned. 'It's Miss Jameson and Miss Forbes, the crossest mistresses at school! How dreadful!'

'Nine teas at half a crown each.' Jane totted up the day's takings on her fingers that evening. 'A dozen eggs sold to Miss Jameson, and Miss Forbes has ordered a duckling for next week-end.'

'This is only the beginning,' said Mrs Appleby. 'We're bound to have lots more customers when the season gets going.'

'And the two crossest mistresses at school turned out to be quite pleasant,' Kitty said, with relief, 'after they'd sampled some of Mummy's fruit-cake. If we can please them, we can please anybody!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

SKIPPER'S STRANGE FIND

'IF Rusty's to be ready for the agricultural show in August,' Kitty told Pete after they had done their homework a few evenings later, 'he's going to need lots of practice in being led.'

So Kitty and Pete took Rusty round the fields in a halter each evening. Dapple followed to keep an eye on her baby. The foal had grown quite accustomed to being handled, and Kitty soon felt the time had come to get him used to new scenes.

'I'm going to take Rusty to the beach,' she told the others.

'Good! We'll all go!' Roddy decided, pushing aside some of the almost endless forms which he had been filling in for his father. 'Take all the ponies. And I'll follow you on foot. I'll bring my swimming things. I can see to the night lines while I'm down there. The vicar ordered some plaice for breakfast if I can catch any.'

Skipper led the way as usual, running ahead and

Skipper and the Headland Four

looking back every few yards to make sure that they were following.

Kitty rode Dapple bare-back across the fields, leading Rusty. Jane and Pete cantered ahead on Prince and Darkie. Roddy went on foot, carrying his swimming trunks and towel and a haversack full of fishing lines and bait.

Skipper ran full-tilt as soon as his pads touched the springy turf of the headland.

He looked back and gave a woof as though to say: 'Come on. This way, everybody!' – and bounded down the steepest path – because it was the shortest way to the sea. Meanwhile the riders and ponies had to use the gently sloping path farther along the cliff.

So by the time they reached the beach, Skipper had already taken the plunge and was swimming along the golden lane made by the sinking sun from the shore to Bird Island.

Kitty dismounted and rolled up the legs of her jeans while she led Rusty and Dapple into the creamy wavelets. Pete and Jane walked their mounts, fetlock-deep. Roddy sprinted from behind a rock where he had been changing. He ran amid a welter of spray, until he was in deep enough water to dive under.

Rusty seemed to like the feel of the waves against his legs. He moved around, lifting his feet

Skipper's strange find

and bringing them down with a splash. He made for deeper water until one big wave nearly knocked him off his balance. He tossed up his head and lashed back at the impudent wave, splashing Kitty.

'He's loving every minute of it!' she chuckled. 'But, oh dear, I wish I'd put on my swimming things. He's drenched me.'

'Woofle! Woofle!' Skipper gave a watery bark as he swam back to the beach.

He ran through the shallow water; then, ears flat, he sped along the cove. At last he flopped on the sand – tongue lolling as he panted for breath.



Skipper and the Headland Four

As the ponies splashed out of the water, he went back to the sea's edge, barking to let everyone know that they had forgotten something important.

'So you want to play your stick game, do you?' Pete said, grabbing a piece of driftwood and throwing it into the waves. 'Here you are then. Fetch!'

Skipper splashed into the sea and swam strongly after the stick. He brought it back in his jaws and dropped it at Pete's feet, looking up at him meaningly.

'You've started something, Pete,' said Jane. 'He'll have you doing this all evening.'

'That's enough, Skipper,' Pete said at last. 'It's nearly bedtime. Come on!' He whistled to the dog as he mounted Darkie. 'Time to go home.'

Skipper and Roddy ran beside the riders as they trotted along the sands.

Soon they came to a stony track which would bring them to the southern part of the headland not far from home.

Kitty rode Dapple slowly up the track, with Rusty following. Jane was ahead on Prince. Pete came behind on Darkie. Below, on the beach, Roddy was fixing the night lines.

Skipper padded alongside Pete. Suddenly he dashed off the track and over the rocks. Pete saw him pawing up at a ledge.

Skipper's strange find

'Come on, Skipper!' he called. 'You ought to know better than to scare the seagull chicks.'

Skipper ignored Pete's call. He scrambled on to the ledge and stood with his nose pressed to a crevice, whimpering.

'Hurry up, Skip!' Pete called to him. 'You'll be left behind.'

Still Skipper wouldn't come. He looked at Pete and wagged his tail.

'Oh, Skipper!' Pete sighed. 'It's too late to play any more games. I've got to feed the bantams when I get home. And all you've got to do is settle down to snooze!'

'Woof! *Woof!*' Skipper interrupted desperately.

'Oh, very well!' Pete groaned, dismounting. 'I s'pose you think you've found something exciting, and you won't be happy until you've shown me.'

He got down from Darkie, and scrambled over the rocks towards the dog.

Skipper stopped whimpering, and now Pete could hear a squeaky mewling from the crevice. Hulloo! This didn't sound like seagull chicks. What had Skipper found? While the dog watched, Pete put his hand into the crevice. His fingers touched something warm and furry. The creature wriggled into the palm of his hand, and carefully he lifted it out.

Skipper and the Headland Four

‘A kitten!’ he gasped. ‘A striped tabby kitten!’ He shouted to the others. ‘Skipper’s found a litter of kittens!’

They scrambled on to the ledge.

‘Oooh! Isn’t he sweet?’ Kitty exclaimed, gently stroking the kitten. ‘I wonder how many more there are down that hole.’

‘I thought I felt two,’ said Pete.

‘Yes, I can hear the others miaowing,’ said Jane. She looked round. ‘I wonder where the mother-cat is.’

‘Probably getting food for the kittens,’ Roddy said. ‘Put that one back with the others, Pete.’ He nodded. ‘That’s it. The mother-cat may be back any minute.’

‘Or she might be out hunting for an hour or more,’ said Jane. ‘I expect she catches birds and mice and voles – and perhaps fish from the rock pools.’

‘I wonder what made her leave home and have her kittens here?’ Kitty asked.

‘Perhaps she hasn’t got a home,’ suggested Jane.

‘She might be a stray,’ decided Roddy. ‘Perhaps she left home because her owners changed house and she didn’t like the new place.’

‘I can’t think of anyone round here who’s lost a cat,’ said Jane. ‘But then she might have travelled miles.’ She looked thoughtful. ‘I wonder what we ought to do.’



'Leave them alone,' decided Kitty. 'Otherwise the mother-cat may desert them.'

'Yes,' agreed Pete, thinking of their own tabby. 'Do you remember how Tabitha wouldn't let us go near her kittens for days?'

'I suppose you're right,' said Jane, putting a hand on Skipper's collar and coaxing him away from the crevice. 'But I don't think there'd be any harm in leaving some food for the mother-cat.'

Early next morning – before school – Jane, Kitty and Pete rode over the headland with a can of fresh milk, a saucer, and some cooked whiting. They put the food on the ledge while Roddy, on the shore below, unhooked some dabs that had been caught on the nightline. Then he joined the others.

Kitty looked round. Herring gulls were flying overhead. A flock of oyster-catchers were wheeling across the waves in ever-changing formation. A buzzard was circling above Bird Island, sharp-eyed, ready to dive after mice.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'There's no sign of the mother-cat,' said Kitty. 'I'd half-hoped she'd be here so that we could make friends with her.' She put a flat stone on two smaller ones to form a roof over the whiting, so that the gulls would be less likely to swoop down and get the food before the mother-cat returned. Suddenly she turned her head to listen. 'Sssh! What's that?'

'Y-o-o-o-o-wlllll!'

It was more of a battle cry than a miaow, and they looked up to see a lean, fully grown tabby cat, striped like a tiger, hissing at them from a nearby rock. The mother-cat was so angry at seeing the children near her kittens that she had dropped a vole which she had been carrying, and was now ready to fight to defend her young.

'Hey, steady on,' Pete protested as the mother-cat lifted her front paws and menacingly showed her sharp claws. 'We're not hurting your kittens.'

'Good puss!' Kitty tried desperately. 'Pretty puss!'

'Stand back, everyone!' advised Roddy. 'Don't crowd round. When she sees that we've brought some food for her, she might be more friendly.'

Don't you believe it!' exclaimed Kitty, tripping over Pete as she tried to get out of the way when the angry cat sprang to attack. 'Ouch! Oh, *ouch!*'

Kitty called out in pain as the cat went for her

Skipper's strange find

ankle, clinging with tearing claws and biting with needle-point teeth. 'Oh, do something, somebody!'

Roddy grabbed Kitty to stop her falling off the ledge. He dragged her back a few paces. Kitty jerked her leg to try to throw off the cat which still clung fiercely.

A gull swooped down at that moment. Kitty gave a yelp of relief as the cat let go and sprang on to the rock, lashing out with her claws towards the swooping bird.

'Saved by the gull!' chuckled Roddy. 'That tiger-cat must have decided that the bird was a worse enemy than you, Kit!'

'Shoo!' Pete helped the cat to send off the gull which now flapped, with angry cackles, out to sea.

Meanwhile the mother-cat spat and hissed at the Applebys and disappeared into the crevice to find her kittens safe. She gave them a good licking before glaring out of the hole towards the children.

'The tiger's on guard!' Pete remarked. 'That's what we'll call her - Tiger!'

'Tiger!' Kitty echoed feelingly as she dabbed her handkerchief on her scratches. 'Ouch! Such a savage cat doesn't deserve such nice, cuddly kittens. No wonder that cat had to leave home. Nobody would want her!'

Skipper and the Headland Four

Roddy tied the handkerchief round Kitty's leg, and they all set off back towards the farmhouse. 'You certainly aren't very fond of Tiger, Kitty,' he laughed. 'But I suppose I'd feel the same about her if it had been my leg that she'd clawed.'

By now they had reached the Headland.

'Come on!' urged Jane. 'We'll have to hurry, or we'll be late for school.' She looked back at the indignant cat which had just appeared at the top of the path. 'Well, goodness me! Tiger's watching to make sure we really do retreat. Poor puss! She must have met so many enemies that she just couldn't believe we wanted to be friends.'

'Don't waste your pity on her!' Kitty said as she limped along. 'She's savage enough to rout all her enemies. She doesn't need any help – or sympathy – from us.'

'We'll leave well alone,' decided Roddy. 'I s'pose that's what we ought to have done in the first place. Oh, look! – Tiger's climbing to the top of the cairn to watch that we don't double back to her family.'



CHAPTER NINE

TAMING A 'TIGER'

ON Saturday morning, while Kitty was visiting Dapple and Rusty in the Home Field, she heard an urgent shout from Pete. She turned to see his ginger head bob up over the fence, and then disappear again.

'Come quickly, Kit!' he shouted. 'You'll never guess what's happening!'

Kitty broke into a run, with Rusty and Dapple trotting behind. She climbed the gate and hurried into the farmyard where Pete beckoned her towards the harness room.

'Sssh! Don't make a sound,' he warned in a whisper. 'Or you'll spoil everything!'

Skipper and the Headland Four

'But what's *happening?*' whispered Kitty, looking round, and seeing her mother and Skipper watching through the kitchen window; Jane peering round the dairy door; Roddy craning out of the hay-loft, and Tabitha and her four now fully-grown kittens in a row along the pig-sty wall. They were all staring at something. But what?

Just then Pete pointed to a lean, striped cat which was slinking wearily towards the harness room.

Kitty blinked. Tiger! – with a kitten in her mouth! But poor Tiger! – there was a gash on her head, and one ear was torn. She looked dreadful.

'What's happened?' Kitty asked Pete.

'Jane found one of the kittens in a box under the bench,' explained Pete. 'Tiger's bringing all her kittens here one by one. She must trust us after all.'

'But she's hurt!' Kitty said. 'What happened to her?'

'Well, Roddy says there were buzzards around Bird Island yesterday,' Pete told her. 'He thinks that one of the buzzards might have tried to carry off a kitten.'

'And Tiger might have got hurt trying to defend it,' Kitty gasped. 'How terrible!'

She watched Tiger pad out of the harness room and make her way painfully across the farmyard

Taming a 'Tiger'

back to the Headland for the third kitten.

Just then Mrs Appleby opened the kitchen window.

'I think you ought to come indoors now and leave Tiger to manage her own affairs,' she called.

The children trooped into the kitchen, and grouped themselves quietly round the window, Kitty and Pete in front, with Skipper resting his chin on the window ledge.

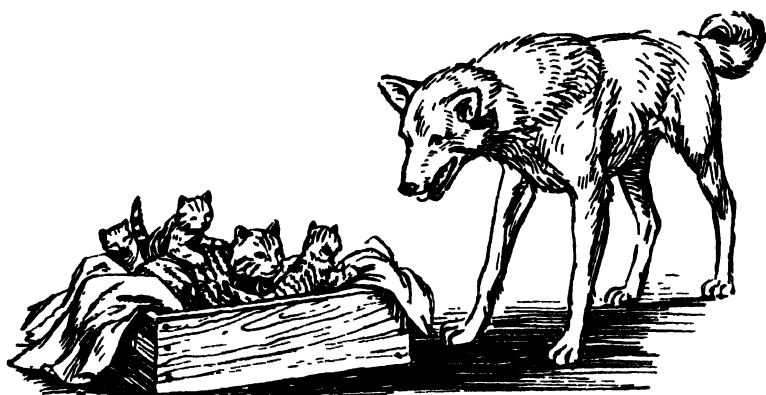
'May we keep Tiger and her kittens?' Kitty asked her mother while they waited. 'I know we've already got Tabitha and her family, but a farm really does need lots of cats to keep down the rats and mice.'

'In a way, it would be helping Daddy,' Pete added.

'We'll see,' their mother said in a tone which gave the children hope. 'Sssh! Quiet now. Here's Tiger again.'

'Ah!' Kitty murmured tenderly, as she saw Tiger carrying the last kitten under the farmyard gate. The mother-cat was very tired now, and her head was bent low so that her furry burden almost touched the cobbles. Paw after paw – painfully, because her wounds were hurting – she disappeared into the gloom of the harness room.

'She's made it!' Pete whooped. 'What a super cat!'



'Just notice how Tiger's mouth is turned up at the corners – as though she's *smiling*,' Jane said a few days later, as the children and Skipper gazed into the cosy box where Tiger was contentedly purring while her three happy, well-tended kittens snuggled against her. 'She knows she's safe.'

'Her wounds are healing fast, and she didn't mind having them bathed,' said Pete.

'She's glad to have a proper home,' decided Roddy. 'And when she and the kittens find out that there's such grand scope for mousing around here, I don't think they'll ever want to stray.'

Tiger turned her head to look at Skipper who moved a few inches nearer. The cat merely shut her eyes sleepily, and her mouth seemed to curve in an even bigger smile.

'See!' said Pete. 'She's not scared of Skipper. Not a bit!'

Taming a 'Tiger'

A heat haze often shimmered over the sea during the days that followed. Tiger and her family soaked up the sun, lying on the warm cobbles.

During the day Skipper dozed in the shade, and, in the evening, was even keener to lead the rush to the beach for a swim, but often the children had to forego this. Homework and the farm jobs seemed to pile up, and mornings and afternoons in the classrooms seemed endless. Never had they so ardently longed for the summer holidays.

Meanwhile Rusty and Dapple began to graze at dawn, and, by noon, they were content to stand sleepily under the green canopy of the oak-tree.

Despite Miss Jameson's and Miss Forbes' efforts to keep Kitty's mind on scholastic matters, the main thought going through her brain was: Can we go on making a success of the farm – Mummy and her teas; Pete and his bantams; Jane and me and our flower selling; Roddy and his lobsters? We've taken on so much! But it *is* fun! As long as one doesn't *worry*. But sometimes I do worry. Things have gone *right* for so long. Will our luck hold?

CHAPTER TEN

RUSTY'S FRIGHT

DURING the spell of warm weather Mr Appleby decided to cut the hay, and, in the days that followed, everybody was busy turning the grass in the sun so that it would dry.

At breakfast-time on Saturday the whole family listened to the BBC weather forecast.

'There is a possibility of thunder later in the day,' said the announcer.

Kitty anxiously glanced at her father.

'We've got to get that hay carried before the rain starts,' declared Mr Appleby. 'Otherwise it will be spoiled.'

Roddy pushed back his chair. 'I'll go and hitch up the tractor, Dad.'

'And I'll harness Captain,' said Mr Appleby. 'We'll need both wagons if we're to save time.'

'May I lead Captain, Daddy?' Pete asked.

'So long as you don't let him brush off his load by getting the wagon too near the gate-posts,' his

Rusty's fright

father teased, reminding Pete of last year's disaster.

Pete gave a sheepish grin.

'We'll help you get a picnic lunch, Mummy.' Jane turned to her mother. 'It will save time to have it in the field.'

'What about the teas?' Kitty remembered the week-end visitors. 'Shall we put up a "closed" sign?'

'I think we'd better,' said Mrs Appleby. 'Will you print it, Kitty?'

'Yes. I'll do it on a shoe-box lid,' Kitty decided, going to the cupboard. 'What shall I say?'

'Sorry - no teas to-day. Haymaking,' suggested Jane. 'Business to-morrow as usual.'

Meanwhile Mrs Appleby was already bustling in and out of the pantry packing up the food. She lifted a cold chicken pie from the stillage.

'We'll eat this with tomatoes and fruit-cake,' she decided. 'There's no time to cut up sandwiches.' She looked anxiously to the wireless set. 'Oh, I do hope the thunder storms miss us!'

By noon, the Applebys had carried half the hay, and the sun blazed from a still cloudless sky. Pete ran to the house to fetch an old straw hat of Kitty's to shield Captain's head from the heat. He snipped out holes for the horse's ears. Everybody broke off to admire Captain in his sun-hat. Captain

Skipper and the Headland Four

seemed quite pleased, but he was even more delighted when Mr Appleby produced his nosebag.

While the behatted Captain munched contentedly, the tractor stood silent and the Applebys ate their hay-field picnic. Then, all too soon, it was time to carry on with the loading.

Kitty looked westward. Dark clouds were gathering. There was a distant rumble. Was it thunder or blasting from the Fenmon quarry eleven miles away?

The others must have noticed, but they didn't say anything. Instead they all worked even faster.

After ten breathless minutes, Kitty broke off for a moment to look skywards as the whine of a jet-plane sounded from beyond the farmhouse.

The swept-wing machine flashed low across the meadow. Next moment it rose steeply, the roar of its jets mingling with the cackling of hens, the quacking of ducks, mooing of cattle and whinnying and squealing of ponies. Captain reared. Mr Appleby leapt for his head, to help Pete steady him and so save the load of hay from toppling off the wagon.

Roddy gazed after the plane.

'Delta Jet,' he identified.

'*Wheeeee!*' whooped Pete. With his hand he imitated the diving zoom of the plane. 'Booosh! There goes the sound-barrier!'

'Don't be a clot, Pete,' scoffed Roddy. 'The



plane wasn't going fast enough for that——' He broke off. 'Hey! What's Skipper trying to tell us?'

They turned to watch the Alsatian. He was standing on the water trough, looking over the hedge and whining in distress.

Just then Kitty heard an anguished whinny from the Home Field.

'That's Dapple! Skipper must have been the first to hear her. . . . Listen! She sounds frantic.' She turned to the others. 'Carry on, everybody. I'm going to see if anything's wrong.'

She ran, with Skipper bounding ahead. As soon as she reached higher ground she saw Dapple, trotting up and down beside the far hedge and whinnying frantically. There was no sign of Rusty. She looked round. What had happened to him? That jet! He had never before heard one, flying so low. He must have panicked, and jumped out of the field.

Skipper and the Headland Four

She turned and called to the haymakers: 'Roddy! Jane! Rusty's gone! Help me to get him back!'

With Dapple and Skipper running beside her, she reached the gate that led into the orchard.

'Rusty! Hey, Rusty!' she called, but her voice trailed off into a sob. There was no need for her to call him. . . . No need for Jane and Roddy to help her catch him.

Rusty lay on his side, quite still among the buttercups in the orchard.

Mr Appleby hurried to the scene of the calamity and knelt down beside the foal.

'Is he dead?' Kitty asked, fighting back her tears. 'What can we do?'

A roll of thunder broke the silence that followed.

'He's breathing,' Mr Appleby said, 'and his eyes are open.' He ran gentle hands over the foal's limbs. 'I don't think there are any bones broken.' He stroked Rusty's glossy neck. 'There, old fellow!' He looked up at Roddy. 'Telephone the vet. If you can't get Mr McNab, try Mr Belton. Then there's that new man at Sand Beach – Jennings. The exchange will tell you his number.'

Kitty felt a spot of rain on her cheek. She jumped to her feet.

'I'll phone,' she said suddenly. 'Pete, stay here

Rusty's fright

with Rusty.' She turned to her father. 'Pete and I will manage by ourselves. You others go back to the haymaking. Every minute counts if you're going to get the hay under cover before the rain starts. Hurry!'

She ran towards the house. Soon she was speaking to Mr. McNab on the telephone, telling him what had happened to Rusty. Big spots of rain splashed the parlour window. She looked out. Everything was blurred, but she managed to see her father and mother leading Captain and the wagon up the cart-track. Too late! The hay would be drenched. Poor Daddy! And poor, poor Rusty! If the others had not come to help Rusty, they would have got the last two loads under cover before the rain began.

'Right you are, Kitty!' came Mr McNab's voice over the telephone. 'I'll bring everything I need. Oh, goodness! – a cloud-burst's just hit us here.'

'And here, too!' Kitty groaned.

'Never mind,' comforted Mr McNab. 'Go back to Rusty and keep him quiet. I'll be with you in ten minutes.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PETE IN A PICKLE

'THIS way, Mr McNab,' said Pete as the vet jumped from his shooting brake, carrying his emergency case, eleven minutes later. 'Rusty's in the orchard.'

They hurried through the rain. Kitty was kneeling in the long grass with the foal's head on her lap. Rusty's ears flickered when he heard their voices, and he rolled his eyes.

As the vet bent over him, a shiver rippled down Rusty's back.

'Now then, young fellow,' Mr McNab said soothingly. 'Where does it hurt?'

Rusty twitched when the vet felt just above the fetlock of his near-hind leg.

'There's a sprained tendon here,' Mr McNab declared. 'I can feel the swelling.'

'Why won't he get up?' asked Kitty. 'Do you think he's hurt his spine?'

'There's no sign of any injury other than that

Pete in a pickle

sprained tendon,' said Mr McNab, wiping the rain from his spectacles. 'He's had a fright, and I think he's feeling a bit sorry for himself.'

Just then, as though she knew Rusty needed comfort, Dapple walked over to him and licked his ears.

Rusty lifted his head, looked round at Dapple, and then scrambled up unsteadily. Kitty noticed Rusty flinch as he put his near-hind leg to the ground. He limped to nuzzle his mother.

'Come on, Dapple.' Mr McNab took the mare by the forelock. 'You lead the way and Rusty will follow.'

The soggy procession moved towards the stable.



Skipper and the Headland Four

'I had big hopes for Rusty in the agricultural show,' Kitty confided to Mr McNab as they walked through the orchard. 'I was planning to enter Dapple and him in the Best Mare and Foal Class.'

'Ah, let me see.' Mr. McNab looked doubtful. 'The show's at the beginning of August, isn't it?'

'Yes.' Kitty looked quickly at the vet. 'Will Rusty's limp have gone by then?'

'That depends.' Mr McNab wisely wouldn't commit himself. 'He'll need rest, of course.'

He opened his case as soon as they reached the stable. He put a thick pad of cotton wool round Rusty's injured leg, and, over it, a bandage which he tied tightly.

'There! Keep him here for a day or two,' Mr McNab advised. 'And I'll make a point of looking in from time to time until the tendon's well on the mend.'

When Mr McNab next came to the farm Rusty's leg seemed a lot better. He still limped, but he was able to move round the stable, and was quite happy with Dapple for company, and Skipper, Tiger and her kittens looking in now and then.

On Thursday Mr McNab said that Rusty could go back in the field, but he would still have to wear his bandage.

Next afternoon Kitty and Jane were late home from school because they were doing some

Pete in a pickle

shopping for their mother and so did not catch the usual bus.

Roddy arrived at Headland Farm without his sisters, and after eating a quick tea, and having a reassuring look at Rusty, hurried down to the beach.

A quarter of an hour after he had gone the telephone bell rang. Mrs Appleby answered it.

'Oh, Pete!' She put down the instrument as her younger son came into the kitchen with the duck eggs he had been collecting. 'I want you to go down to the beach with a message for Roddy.'

'Right-ho, Mum,' Pete agreed readily, thinking that Roddy might take him out in the *Curlew*.

'It's about the lobsters,' Mrs Appleby went on. 'The vicar's just telephoned. His brother's going back to London to-night on the eight o'clock train and he wanted a couple of lobsters to take with him.'

'But Roddy doesn't lift the pots till seven on this tide,' Pete pointed out.

'Well, he might lift them earlier this once,' Mrs Appleby said, 'if you explain that it's an urgent order.'

With Skipper leading the way, Pete scampered over the meadow towards the headland and the cove where the *Curlew* was beached. Good for Roddy, he thought. He was getting quite a lot of

Skipper and the Headland Four

customers for his lobsters, and the money was helping to save the farm. Maybe they were all in for a spell of good luck now. The hay was going to be all right, and Rusty was on the mend. Pete whistled cheerfully, slid down the scree to the cove and ran over the pebbles to the blue-painted dinghy on the shingle.

'Roddy! Hey – Ro-od-dy!' he called, looking all round.

Skipper barked and then stopped to listen for an answer.

There was no sign of Roddy. Where was he? Pete searched the *Curlew* for clues. All her tackle was aboard, her lug-sail neatly furled, centre-board raised. There was the bait for the lobster pots – the boat-hook and the oars. Pete rumped his ginger hair, puzzled.

'If Roddy doesn't come soon,' he told Skipper, 'he won't be able to lift the lobster pots in time. He'll lose an urgent order. Oh, crumbs!' He took a deep breath. 'Roddy! Hey RODDY!'

Pete shouted until he was quite hoarse. Well, there was only one thing to do. He would lift the lobster pots himself. He had often helped Roddy, so he knew just what to do.

'I won't use the lug-sail,' Pete thought, as he dragged the lightweight dinghy down to the water's edge while Skipper tried to help by tugging

Pete in a pickle

at the painter. 'That might be tricky. I'll row!'

Pete tugged and pushed the boat over the shingle until at last the waves were lapping her bows, and she was afloat. As he scrambled aboard, Skipper jumped over the gunwale and sat in the bows thumping his tail.

Pete found the oars heavy to handle, but the tide helped the *Curlew* on her course and soon he and Skipper were getting near the spot where Roddy had dropped his lobster pots.

The boat had shipped quite a lot of water, so Pete had to stop rowing for a while to bail, but, in spite of that, he soon brought the *Curlew* alongside the float that marked the first lobster pot. He took the boat-hook, pushed Skipper out of his way and leaned over the bows to pick up the float and haul in the wickerwork pot. There was a big crab inside – *and* a fine lobster! Super-duper! Pete got the fish out of the pot in the way Roddy had taught him, rebaited it, and let it plop back under the surface.

He happened to look down. Golly! The *Curlew* was shipping a lot of water! Again Pete grabbed the bailing can. He worked hard, tipping the water over the side. But it seemed to be rising all the time, and with Pete having to stop rowing in order to bail, the *Curlew* was drifting. She was now half-way to Bird Island.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Gosh, Skipper!' Pete darted a desperate glance at the puzzled dog who had scrambled on to the seat to be out of the water. 'If only you could help!'

Pete scooped out three more cans of water and glanced across to the Headland. The boat was drifting fast, carried out on the ebb tide. He shivered as he heard the dismal clang of the bell buoy out in the fairway. What would happen to him and Skipper? He must stop the dinghy drifting. But how? Pete threw the anchor overboard. If only it would hold!

Imagine the *Curlew* springing a leak! What would Roddy say? He'd be dreadfully angry. But all the same Pete wished he were here to help. . . . Oh, good-o! The anchor *was* holding. The *Curlew* stopped drifting and Pete started to bail again. He scooped until his arms ached. Still the water crept higher in the bottom of the boat.

'We're sinking, Skipper!' Pete gulped. He felt the boat lurch from under him as the *Curlew* sank down into the sea. 'We're not abandoning ship – It's abandoning us! Gosh! Oh – spurple – *gurgle!*'



CHAPTER TWELVE

SKIPPER THE HERO

PETE trod water and ruefully watched all that was left of the *Curlew* – the oars – drifting away towards Bird Island.

He looked at Skipper who was swimming up to him.

‘Crumbs! There’ll be a terrific row about this, Skipper,’ he groaned. ‘Come on! We’d better swim ashore and own up.’

With Skipper dog-paddling alongside, Pete swam energetically, using a splashing over-arm stroke. He tried not to be scared. The beach looked a long way off, and sometimes when the waves were high, he couldn’t even see it.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'I'm puffed!' he thought to himself some minutes later. 'Perhaps I'm trying to swim too fast. Steady, Pete! Steady!'

He opened his mouth to gulp in air, and instead got a mouthful of salt water. Still out of breath, he tried to strike out again. Where was he? The waves seemed higher now.

And where was Skipper?

'Skipper! Oh, Skip!'

He tried to shout but could only make a choking gurgle.

'Skip! Oh, Roddy! Mother. . . ! *Mum!*' he managed to call before the ebb-current swirled him against a rock, half-stunning him.

He felt himself sinking. He was drowning. And no one knew. No one!

A moment later Skipper swam round the rock to look for Pete. Where was he? *Nowhere!* Skipper frantically swam in a circle. Then he caught sight of Pete's ginger head just below the surface.

'Woofle!'

He managed a watery bark as Pete's head bobbed up for the second time, but the boy did not seem to hear. Skipper swam to Pete and grabbed his shirt in his mouth. Lifting his head as high as he could and still biting hold of Pete, Skipper began swimming for the shore. Somehow he managed to dog-paddle clear of the current. Now he was in slack

Skipper the hero

water where the waves were only ripples. Skipper could not open his mouth to breathe properly without losing his grip on Pete. His lungs were bursting. His legs, jaws and neck ached. Pete's limp weight was pulling Skipper's head under the water. Strong and big though the dog was, he could not hold out much longer.



He was going down – *down*, yet he was determined to hold on to Pete. Quite suddenly his paws touched something solid – sand! He struggled forward through the waves to the beach.

Still gripping Pete's shirt in his teeth, Skipper

Skipper and the Headland Four

dragged the boy inch by inch out of the water.

Panting, he stood over Pete. Why was he lying so still? He licked Pete's face and nudged him under the chin with his nose – no move from Pete!

Skipper pawed at his chest. He raised his head and howled. Then frantically he again licked Pete's face and whimpered in his ears.

At last Pete's eyelashes flickered. He stirred slightly. Skipper's tail gave a quick wag. Pete moaned. Where was he? He was lying on solid sand! But he'd been drowning. The *Curlew* had sunk. And he'd lost Skipper. But Skipper was beside him, licking his face.

What had happened?

Pete staggered to his feet. His legs felt like jelly. He leaned against a breakwater. Skipper sat down and anxiously looked up at him.

'I'll soon be all right, Skipper!' Pete said, and then, as he became less dazed, he realized what must have happened. 'You saved my life! You must have dragged me back to the beach.' He put out a hand to stroke the dog. 'And we're still not beaten! We'll get home somehow. But – oh, crumbs! – I do feel *queer*!'

'I've just looked round Pete's door. He's fast asleep!' Mrs Appleby told the others later that

Skipper the hero

evening, and patted Skipper who, as the hero of the hour, had been given a very special supper of meaty stew with crunchy dog biscuits floating in tasty gravy. 'And, Roddy——' Mrs Appleby added, 'don't scold Pete too much about losing the *Curlew*.'

Roddy nodded. 'I suppose I was an idiot not to have left a note to say that I'd found a leak in the boat, and had gone to Shingle Bay to get some copper to patch it. All the same, it's a terrific blow! Bang goes my lobster business!'

'Sssh! What's that?' Kitty broke in, turning her head to listen. 'Skipper's heard something, too. Look at him!'

Skipper had padded to the door.

Suddenly they heard a shout from Pete's bedroom.

'Skipper! Where are you!' Pete was yelling as though his life depended on it. 'Help! Roddy! Mummy! *Help!*'

'He's having a nightmare,' Mrs Appleby said, jumping up from the rocking chair and putting down her mending.

The children, Mrs Appleby and Skipper, hurried up the stairs and along the landing to Pete's room. Roddy clicked on the light and they saw Pete, sitting up in bed, his eyes shut, making swimming movements with his arms.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Help!' he called weakly before giving a gurgling groan and sinking down to the pillows as though he were drowning.

Skipper jumped on to the bed and began licking Pete's face, while Mrs Appleby went to the other side and smoothed the ginger curls from his hot forehead.

'There! There! Pete!' Mrs Appleby said soothingly. 'You were only living it all again in a nightmare.'

Kitty sat on the other side of the bed and put an arm round Pete's shoulder.

'It was only a *dream*, you silly!' she told him. 'You're safe and sound in bed!'

'So I am!' blinked Pete, giving a grin of relief, 'and a second ago I was drowning again – half-way out to Bird Island!' He caught sight of Roddy at the foot of the bed, and his smile faded. His voice was small and scared as he said: 'I haven't had a chance to say I'm sorry about the *Curlew*, Roddy.'

'That's all right, Pete,' Roddy said doubtfully, trying to hide his dismay. 'All the same you were a chump not to drop the anchor.'

'But I did!' said Pete, his eyes shining. 'I remember now. I threw it overboard so that the *Curlew* wouldn't drift while I bailed!'

'Good! Then the chances are that the *Curlew* will be on the middle sand-bank, and we'll be able

Skipper the hero

to salvage her at low tide to-morrow,' said Roddy, smiling broadly now. 'Some of the tackle may wash up at Dolphin Bay or Bird Island, and, luckily I've got a spare set of oars, and some old lobster pots that might be mended.'

'I'll help!' Pete offered eagerly. 'I'll do anything you say, Roddy.'

'Right!' Roddy immediately took him up on his offer. 'Go to sleep so that we can all have some peace.'

Pete flopped on to the pillow, and pretended to snore. Skipper seemed puzzled and, as they went out of the room, he turned and again jumped on to Pete's bed. He looked very white against the darker colours of the patchwork quilt. He lay down, his head on the pillow, making it quite plain that he wanted to stay in case Pete again needed help that night.

'Very well!' laughed Mrs Appleby, in the doorway, as Pete broke off his mock snoring, put an arm round the dog, and settled down to sleep. 'Just this once! But not another sound out of either of you until morning.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRouble FOR KITTY

AT last it was Rusty's big day – the day of the agricultural show. The Applebys had arrived early and Mr Appleby and Roddy had been busy all morning, showing the Jersey cows and calves in the Cattle Classes. Mrs Appleby, together with other Women's Institute members, was helping in the luncheon tent, and Pete was in the Fur and Feather marquee, brushing his rabbits ready for the judges to inspect them.

Jane was waiting with Dapple in the horse-box. Kitty, with Skipper beside her, led Rusty into a meadow not far from the showground where she could walk him up and down quietly away from all the noise and crowds.

Then, as Kitty was brushing Rusty, Skipper ran to greet an old friend – Shirley Leason who was in the same form as Kitty at school.

'Hullo,' Shirley said after she had made a fuss of Skipper. 'So this is Rusty. I was hoping you'd be

Trouble for Kitty

at the show, Kitty. I haven't seen you since I went down with measles a couple of weeks before we broke up. What's been happening?'

'Oh, masses of things,' Kitty said, smiling brightly, glad to see the other girl. 'Rusty was frightened by a jet; he jumped a hedge and strained a tendon. We were in a terrific flap because we thought he might not be fit for the show. But he's fine now. Then we nearly lost half the hay in a rain-storm, but managed to dry it out.'

'Goodness!' said Shirley. 'You have had a time.'

'There's worse to come,' said Kitty. 'Pete sank the *Curlew*, nearly got drowned, and was saved by Skipper——'

Kitty paused for breath, and Skipper gave a tail-wag at the mention of his name.

'We had a dreadful time, salvaging the *Curlew*,' Kitty went on. 'It was touch and go, but we managed it.' She smiled at Shirley, and put out a hand to touch Rusty. 'And now this is our biggest day of all. So much depends on whether Rusty does well. I've entered him and his mother for the Best Mountain or Moorland Mare and Foal Class, which is being judged later this afternoon.'

'How exciting!' said Shirley, and looked round. 'Where's Dapple now?'

'With Jane in the horse-box,' explained Kitty. She handed Shirley the halter rope. 'That reminds

Skipper and the Headland Four

me. I've got to take this body brush to Jane. She'll need it for Dapple. I shan't be long.'

Skipper ran alongside Kitty. Rusty turned to watch them go. But he did not seem to be at all worried by their departure, and soon began to nibble a button on Shirley's blazer.

'Oh, please stop it, Rusty!' Shirley begged.

Just then, from the lane beyond the spinney at the end of the meadow, came the blare of a motor-car horn, followed by a mare's whinny.

Rusty's ears quivered. Was that his mother calling? He wasn't quite sure. He heard the whinny again. Yes, it did sound like Dapple. He jerked his head to get free. Shirley was taken by surprise. The halter rope slipped through her hand as the foal cantered away.

'Rusty! Come back, Rusty!' Shirley called, running after him.

He cantered down the meadow, along a path through the spinney and jumped a low rail. He found himself in a lane. Where now? He heard another whinny, trotted round a bend and saw a brown mare and foal following a caravan.

Rusty cantered up to the mare and nuzzled her flank. Although she was not his mother, her nearness made him feel safe. She turned her head towards him and tenderly licked his neck as

Trouble for Kitty

though to say: 'I don't know where you've come from, but you're welcome to stay.'

The other foal was too surprised to be jealous of Rusty just yet. He gazed at him in a puzzled way.

Meanwhile Rusty trotted along with the others and, a few moments later a half-gypsy youth, who was leading a grey cart-horse between the shafts of the caravan, happened to look round. He blinked as he saw two foals instead of one. Was he seeing double?

'Well, I never did!' he exclaimed, and hurried round to the back of the caravan. He patted Rusty's neck. 'Ullo, young feller,' he said. 'So you want to join the gypsies, eh? All ri', then.'

He looped Rusty's trailing halter to the mare's rope. Rusty trotted along quite happily. He felt safe with the mare and the other foal. He thought that soon he would be given something to eat, and that before



Skipper and the Headland Four

long he would somehow find his own mother and Kitty.

After a while the wagons came to rest on the wide grassy verge at one side of the lane.

Some of the other gypsies – children and grown-ups – came to the back of the last caravan to inspect Rusty and to make a fuss of him.

“Ere, have some!” said the first youth, holding out a stale crust. ‘I don’t know where you’ve come from, but you belong to us now. We didn’t even have to steal you. Finders keepers, and it was *you* ’oo found *us*!’

Meanwhile Kitty was frantically galloping Dapple across the meadow near the showground. Her eyes were clouded with worry. Rusty missing! And just before he was due in the show ring!

Kitty put Dapple over the fence at the end of the meadow. Rusty couldn’t be far away. She had not lost any time when Shirley had given the alarm. Skipper had wanted to follow, but Kitty decided that he would be more useful helping Shirley who was searching the adjoining fields on foot.

Ducking to avoid the branches, Kitty rode through the spinney. Of all the bad luck! Really Shirley was *dim* to have let Rusty’s halter slip through her fingers.

Kitty trotted Dapple down the lane, impatient

Trouble for Kitty

at the delay caused by having to go so slowly. She could not canter Dapple on such a hard surface. As soon as she reached the part where the verge started, she swung Dapple on to the grass and let her gallop.

Dapple was as anxious as Kitty. She seemed to know that she was looking for her foal.

'Rusty! Oh, thank goodness!' Kitty gasped in relief as she and Dapple rounded a bend and saw the gypsy encampment with Rusty tethered to the mare and foal. 'You've soon found friends.'

She jumped down from Dapple's back and started to untie Rusty. Two grimy children watched and then scuttled away to report to the grown-ups.

'Hoy! What's the game?' demanded the gypsy youth, looming round the caravan. 'That foal ain't yours.'

'He most certainly is,' said Kitty. 'Thank you for looking after him. Now I'm in a hurry, if you don't mind.'

"Urry you may be in.' The youth assumed a breathless, high-pitched tone to mimic her. 'But this 'ere foal is h'ours.' He turned to the other gypsies who had clustered round. 'Hain't that so?'

'Aye!' went up the chorus.

'That he is,' nodded the old woman with the clay pipe.

Skipper and the Headland Four

'Rot!' declared Kitty, not even taking her gaze off the knot she was struggling to untie.

'We call him Brownie, don't we?' invented the youth, turning to the rest of the tribe of gypsies.

'Ay, that's ri', nodded the old woman.

'Our mare 'ad twins – see!' The youth jerked the rope from Kitty's grasp. 'Now be off with you! You're only a bit of a girl – an', there's a lot of us, an' some folks think we're a rough lot.'

'I'm not scared of you!' Kitty flared, facing them.

'Ho, no?' mocked a skinny, lank-haired girl of about her own age. 'Then why are you shakin' like a blinkin' leaf?'

'You need a lesson, you young madam,' cackled the old woman, shaking a stick under Kitty's nose. 'Be off with you!'

'What abaht this mare?' A sly-looking youth grabbed Dapple's rein. 'Ain't she ours as well?'

Kitty snatched the rein from his grasp. These gypsies were hateful. They laughed tauntingly as Kitty, nearly in tears, mounted Dapple and rode away round the bend. Her lips trembled. They thought she had ridden away because she was scared of them. Well, she *was* scared, but even so she was not going to let them have Rusty. She looked back to make sure she was out of sight of the gypsies. She tied Dapple to a gate, and

Trouble for Kitty

silently crept back on the field side of the quick-thorn hedge, crouching so that she would not be seen. Soon she was level with Rusty. Through the hedge she could see the gypsies busy in front of the caravans, making a fire. So they were going to have a meal, were they? Well, that ought to keep them busy while she put her plan into action.

Her heart thudding, she scrambled through a hole in the hedge, the thorns catching in her hair, and dragging at her blazer.

Rusty turned his head as Kitty tiptoed forward and began to undo the knot which tied him to the mare. Rusty nipped her playfully by way of greeting, and then whinnied loudly.

Kitty groaned. Never had she heard a foal whinny so long and so loud. Would the gypsies come to see what he was making such a fuss about? Desperately she dug her finger nails into the fibres of the knotted rope. If only she'd got a knife! She gave a gasp of relief. The rope was yielding, but slowly. Good! She'd done it. Rusty was free.

Then her delight turned to dismay as the gypsy youth came angrily round the back of the caravan.

'So it's you agen!' he shouted.

He snatched Rusty's halter from her. She tried to grab it back, missed, and glared furiously into his dark, surly face.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SKIPPER TO THE RESCUE

‘SO that’s yer game, is it?’ The youth caught Kitty roughly by the arm. He turned to call to the others. ‘It’s that girl agen. She’s come sneakin’ back after the foal.’

Kitty felt desperate. She was trapped. How could she, single-handed, get Rusty back to the show in time for the Mare and Foal Class? She couldn’t fight the gypsies, but at least she could make a noise.

She took a deep breath, and shouted at the top of her voice.

‘Help, somebody! *Help!*’ She went on shouting

Skipper to the rescue

non-stop. 'Come quickly, somebody! *Thieves!* I need help!'

'Stop that row!' the youth said, looking alarmed.

'Take no 'eed of 'er!' advised the crone. 'It's only 'er word against ours, and she's only a kid.'

Still shouting, Kitty struggled to shake off the youth's grip. Would anybody hear her, or was everybody at the showground? The lane seemed deserted except for the gypsies, and they were everywhere. Suddenly she stopped shouting to listen. Was that Skipper's bark?

Her eyes lit up as she saw a powerful white shape leap the hedge – Skipper.

'Quick, Skipper!' she shouted. 'Help! Oh, *help!*'

Skipper's teeth bared in a snarl as he bounded towards the gypsy. His front paws crashed against the youth's chest, knocking him off his feet. He dug his teeth into the sleeve of the youth's shirt holding him.

'Get 'im orf!' yelled the youth, cowering in the dust. 'He'll 'ave me.'

'Hold on, Skipper!' Kitty ordered.

She grasped Rusty's halter. Wildly she ran down the lane with the foal cantering alongside. The other gypsies were grabbing sticks from the hedge-bank to drive off Skipper who was still holding the youth's sleeve.

Skipper and the Headland Four

Kitty turned to look back as she came to the bend in the lane.

'Skipper!' she shouted. 'Let go now.'

Skipper obeyed. But still stood over the youth, making it plain that he would attack again if necessary.

Meanwhile Kitty had reached Dapple. Quickly she untied her from the gate, jumped on her back, and, leading Rusty, set off up the lane at a fast trot.

'Come on now, Skipper!' she called.

With a final snarl at the gypsies, Skipper turned and bounded after Kitty.

As they hurried to the showground, Kitty's thoughts were whirling.

'There's no time to rest Rusty and Dapple,' she told herself. 'I'll just have to brush them quickly and tidy myself. I must look a sight!'

'If the judges don't make up their minds soon, I'll pass out through sheer suspense,' Kitty thought while she waited with Rusty in the show-ring next to Dapple and Jane.

She watched anxiously as the three judges walked across to Dapple. They examined her mouth. They walked all round her, and stood a little way off and stared, heads on one side. Then one of the judges took another look at Rusty. Kitty crossed her fingers for luck.

Skipper to the rescue

At last the judge straightened up, looked blank (if *only* she could read his thoughts!), and scribbled something on his pad. Together with the other judges, he moved away to examine some of the other mares and foals that were being exhibited in the same class.

Minutes ticked by. Kitty restlessly shifted her feet. Were the judges coming back to have another look at Dapple and Rusty? But no! They were walking into the middle of the ring, talking together. Now they were comparing their notes.

One of the judges walked slowly to the microphone.

'The winners of the Best Mountain or Moorland Mare and Foal Class are as follows.' The judge paused to look at his notes. 'First: Dapple and Headland Rusty, owned by——' Again the judge glanced at his notes: 'Miss Kitty Appleby.'

As though in a dream, Kitty patted Dapple and Rusty.

'Oh, you wonderful ponies!' she told them. 'We've won!'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HARVEST HOME

ONE evening some weeks later Kitty bustled round the farm kitchen, helping her mother and Jane to dish up the harvest supper.

On the long table, by each place, were little harvest loaves, shaped and marked to look like round thatched ricks. Sheafs of corn gleamed against the dark rafters.

At last Mrs Appleby called the guests from the parlour. There was Frank, the cowman, a few neighbours and friends, including Mr McNab, the vet, and Mr Newton from the shoe factory.

'Well, here we are again!' Mr Appleby said, sitting at the head of the table and smiling round at everyone as they took their places. 'Another harvest 'supper, and it doesn't seem a twelve-month since the last one.'

That's true, thought Kitty; the year had passed quickly. Yet so much had been crowded into it, especially during the past six months since she had climbed up the cliff path, glad to be home after her visit to Great-Aunt Margaret.

Harvest home

Then there had been the struggle to save the farm from the threat of a sale by auction!

Now – thanks to a good harvest – that danger was over. Of course there would be other set-backs and difficulties. That was life – Mummy said – particularly a farming life.

But it was worth it, Kitty decided, and thought that the best thing about life on a farm was that there were so many animals everywhere!

She glanced towards the striped cat who was sleeping in the rocking chair. Tiger was now a fine rat-catcher. Woe betide any rat who tried to raid the Appleby corn bins! Kitty smiled as she saw Tiger's kittens, now well grown, playing at the far end of the kitchen. They were going to be good mousers, all three of them.

Then there was Laddie, faithful, quiet – rather taken for granted, a real farm-dog, sleeping in his corner after a hard day's work.

And – of course Skipper! He was on the hearth, head on paws, his eyes moving as he watched the plates being handed round.

Just then Mr Appleby stood up and cleared his throat.

'Well, I never believe in much speechifying at harvest suppers——'

'Hear! Hear!' broke in Pete, gazing hungrily down at the sliced chicken, bread sauce, runner

Skipper and the Headland Four

beans and roast potatoes that Jane had just put in front of him.

‘Especially when there’s good food to be eaten,’ added Mr Appleby.

‘And it’ll be cold if you don’t make it short and snappy, Dad,’ groaned Roddy.

‘Save your speech until after we’ve eaten,’ suggested Jane.

‘No, I’ll just be brief!’ said Mr Appleby. He turned towards the hearth. ‘Skipper!’ He suddenly called, and, to everyone’s astonishment, coaxed the puzzled Alsatian to sit in his chair. ‘As a farmer, I never believe in spoiling any animal. But this is one of those rare occasions——’

He broke off to smile at Mrs Appleby who got up and moved her husband’s plate from in front of Skipper. In its place she put Skipper’s own bowl of tasty chicken scraps, and took her husband’s supper to a spare place next to Kitty and Pete.

Meanwhile Jane carried a tray laden with special titbits for Laddie, Tiger and the kittens, and Tabitha and her family, who had trooped in from the parlour.

‘Gosh! Dad!’ broke in Pete. ‘What goes on? Why have you put Skipper there?’

‘Because he deserves the place of honour at the head of the table,’ said Mr Appleby, with a chuckle



at the surprised looks on everyone's face. 'And here's a special bit of news I've saved for this occasion——'

He took from his pocket a circular metal object and tied it loosely round Skipper's neck with a blue ribbon.

'It's the Blue Cross medal,' whooped Pete.

'Yes, Pete,' Mr Appleby said. 'For saving your life. Mr McNab told the Blue Cross people all about your experience when you scuttled the *Curlew*, and they've awarded Skipper this medal.'

'Hurrah!' exclaimed Pete. 'Oh, cheers!'

'Good for Skipper!' added Roddy.

'Doesn't he look handsome, sitting there with his medal?' sighed Jane.

'And he not only saved Pete,' Kitty said to the visitors as they all started to eat. 'He saved Rusty from the gypsies; helped to track him and Dapple

Skipper and the Headland Four

when they were frightened by the storm——'

'Found Tiger's kittens on the cliff,' added Pete.

'And helped to start our flower business by holding the basket and begging so fetchingly,' Jane reminded them.

'For one dog,' said Mrs Appleby, 'he's done a lot towards saving this farm.'

'He's a grand dog,' said Roddy. 'And look! — he's a really modest hero. He's so puzzled by all this fuss — being made to sit in Dad's chair, with his food on the table instead of the floor, that he doesn't know whether he ought to eat his supper or not.'

'Good dog, Skipper,' Mr Appleby said. 'Eat. Yes, go on, eat it up!'

Skipper looked round at them all. He shook his head because the ribbon and medal felt strange round his neck. He picked up a piece of chicken liver from the bowl and looked questioningly towards his master. Was he doing right?

Yes; they all seemed pleased with him.

While he ate, his bushy tail began to wave steadily and happily — like a flag of victory!